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By William Black,



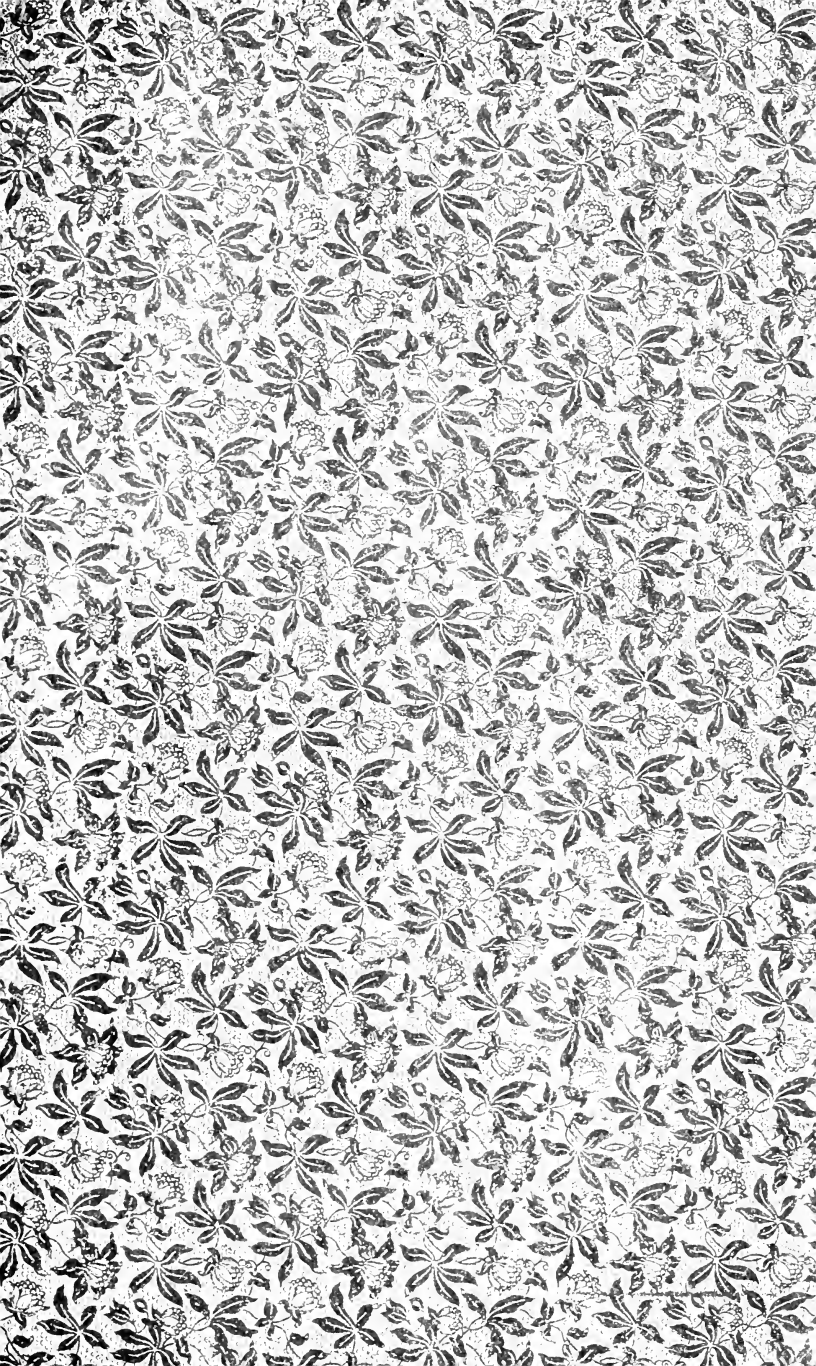
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IN FAR LOCHABER.

BY

WILLIAM BLACK,

AUTHOR OF

"A PRINCESS OF THULE," "MACLEOD OF DARE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

SECOND EDITION.

LONDON :

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Green Bay 13 May 51 Ship 30, 1888

IN FAR LOCHABER.



CHAPTER I.

IN FETTERS.

KIRK O' SHIELDS, a small town in Lanarkshire, that all the week long was a roaring pandemonium of noise and fire and steam—engines shrieking, boiler-works hammering, blasts and furnaces belching forth red flame into the heavy, smoke-laden atmosphere—sank of a Sunday into a sudden and unnatural quiet, that seemed to deepen and deepen as the slow hours of the afternoon dragged by and darkness and the night came down. And nowhere was the

silence more marked and impressive than in the Minister's parlour, whence all worldly thoughts and cares and interests were supposed to be scrupulously banished, and the evening, after the active services of the day, given over to silent reading and meditation. On this particular Sabbath night there were three persons in the hushed little room, all of them absorbed in their pious task ; and not a sound was audible beyond the occasional turning over of a leaf, or perhaps (for human nature is frail, and the time passed slowly) a bit of a half-concealed sigh from one of the girls. The Minister himself sat in the big easy-chair by the fire-place, the family Bible spread open on his knees, his head slightly inclined forward, his two hands partly supporting the ponderous volume. He was rather a small man, of pronounced and stern features ; his forehead deeply lined ; his dark gray eyes, set under bushy

eyebrows, usually expressing a profound and habitual melancholy, though at times they were capable of flashing forth a fire of resentment or indignation. Suffering had left its traces on this worn and furrowed face, but the resignation of the Christian was there as well. If the heavy brows, the keen nostrils, the strong upper lip and still stronger under lip, showed determination, not to say doggedness, of will, the deep-set, unutterably sad gray eyes were those of a man who had come through much tribulation, and had brought himself to accept these trials as the discipline of an all-wise and all-merciful Father.

Of the two daughters who were seated at the table, both with books before them, the elder, Alison by name, was a young woman of eighteen or nineteen, of pale complexion, clear gray eyes with dark eyelashes, and smoothly braided dark brown hair. A calm intelligence and a sufficient

self-possession were visible in her shapely forehead and well-cut mouth ; but at this moment the ordinary bright and friendly scrutiny of her eyes had given way to an absent look as she leaned forward over her reading. Perhaps she saw but little of the printed page before her. In church that morning, after the introductory psalm had been sung, the Minister had advanced to the front of the pulpit and made the brief announcement : “ The prayers of this congregation are requested for a young woman about to enter upon a long journey ; ” and the protracted and earnest and curiously personal appeal that followed for Divine protection and loving-kindness and guardianship was known by all the people present to be made on behalf of the Minister’s own daughter, Alison Blair. And now, despite the strict exclusion of all worldly things from the meditations of the Sabbath evening, perhaps there were

visions before those mild, clear, calm gray eyes. On the morrow Alison Blair was going away into an unknown country.

The younger sister, Agnes, was of the same complexion as Alison, but there was less decision of character in her refined and gentle face. Her large eyes were wistful, the mouth sensitive even to sadness, and her delicate features looked all the more ethereal that they were set about by faintly straw-coloured hair that even sunlight could hardly have made to shimmer into gold. And if in this noiseless small room there were visions also before her eyes, they were visions of no earthly country or earthly pilgrimage. Her favourite reading was the Book of Revelation, and she did not tire of it; for where was the limit to her far-reaching dreams of the new heaven and the new earth, the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, prepared as a bride adorned for her

husband? Nay, in this profound stillness could she not hear some distant murmur, as coming from the wide and wonderful spaces that were visible to her mental eyes? On these Sabbath evenings Kirk o' Shields lay silent in the darkness, as if stricken by the hand of death. But in the mystical and shining far regions that she beheld, were there no sounds that could come faintly towards an intently listening ear, across the starlit deeps of the sky? "And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thundrings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints." Kirk

o' Shields, and all its squalor and din and wretchedness, were forgotten in these entranced dreams ; she beheld a great multitude, arrayed in shining robes, and singing, as it were, a new song. " And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders : and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth." And in her fanciful way she listened, and still listened, and seemed to hear, as the hushed half-hours went by.

" Alison," said the Minister, happening to look up, " what book is that ye're reading ? "

The sudden breaking of the deep silence startled the girl, but she answered the question, naming a well-known Sunday magazine, a bound volume of which lay before her on the table.

" I thought as much," said the Minister,

with a brief sigh of resignation, and he returned to his Bible.

But the next moment he had looked up again, and in the deep-set gray eyes there was an angry glow of indignation.

“And a fine thing it is,” he said, with a resentment that was none the less bitter that it was uttered in slow and measured tones—“a fine thing it is to bring novels and romances into a God-fearing family under the guise of reading fitted for the Sabbath-day—ay, and ministers of the Gospel not ashamed to lend their names to such a practice. But the Enemy of Mankind has inseedious ways and means ; he’ll take servants where he can get them, even if they’re just come down from the pulpit ; and little does the Reverend This or the Reverend That think whose work he is about when he is passing perneecious and soul-destroying leeterature into honest households. It’s not enough that the

frivolous and idle and worldly should steep their minds in that poison ; the remnant of Israel, that have been trying to keep the Lord's Day pure and sanctified to His name, they must be induced to drink also, and by his own appointed servants. His servants ? the Devil's servants I call them : purveyors of lying, what else can they be ? The worship of lying—that is a strange worship to be seen among men. And look at the altars the poor, blind, deluded creatures are proud to raise ! Look at the monument in Prince's Street of Edinburgh, and the monument in George's Square in Glasgow, to the Great Liar ! Grand monuments they are—braw monuments they are—raising their tall columns into the skies, and saying to every one that passes by, ' This is the man the nation delighteth to honour ! ' Honour for the Greatest Liar --that is the new worship on the face of God's earth. But of one thing, lass, you

may be sure—that when the Lord's persecuted people were being driven from moor to moss, and from glen to hill-side, scattered here and hewn down there by the bloody dragoons—scarcely daring to lift up their voices in prayer and supplication lest their pursuers should overtake and overwhelm them—they little thought or cared whether they should be made a by-word and a jest for the amusement of the Edinburgh lawyers and their fine leddies and misses. They knew that the flame in their hearts was of the Lord's kindling ; they knew that their blood, spilt on the heather, would not be spilt in vain. The Scotland of this day is a degenerate country surely if she doesna bethink her of what she owes to the martyrs of the Covenant." He paused for a second or two ; his eyes lost their fire and resumed their ordinary expression of profound and resigned sadness. "And yet I wonder,"

he said, slowly, "what old Adam Blair of Moss-end would have thought if he could have foreseen the time when preachers of the Gospel, ordained ministers of the Church of Christ, would connive at making novel-reading a pastime in believing families—ay, and what he would have thought could he have foreseen one of his own name and lineage busy with such work on a Sabbath evening."

"I was not reading the story, father," Alison said gently; "but I will go and get another book."

Softly she stole away to her own little room upstairs. She had no need of any light; a dull red glow—a pulsating red glow, waxing and waning in fitful flushes—shone through the brown blind of the solitary window. In former years every house-window in Kirk o' Shields, as in most other Scotch towns, had its blind thus drawn down all day long on the

Sabbath, as a matter of ordinary decorum ; but this observance has now almost entirely disappeared ; only here and there a respecer of other days—a minister, or elder, or church officer, or the like—tenaciously clings to the old custom. And of course the Rev. Ebenezer Blair was among these. He belonged to the famous family of the Blairs of Moss-end, who had borne their testimony in troublous times, and had achieved great honour in these parts ; and in all things, even in the smallest, Ebenezer Blair was content to walk in the footsteps of his forefathers, whatever might be the changing fashion of his neighbours or friends.

Alison easily found the volume that she sought ; but before returning to the room below, she went to the window, and put the blind aside a few inches, and looked out. Those red flames of the iron-works, now flashing up into the darkness of

the night, and sending a swift crimson glow along the chimneys and slates of the opposite houses, had always had for her a singular fascination. Perhaps it was that they formed the one beautiful thing, the one beautiful piece of colour, visible in the murky atmosphere that hung over Kirk o' Shields from week's end to week's end. In the daytime the flames were of an orange hue — lambent tiger-lilies she thought they were, shining afar amid that melancholy waste of gray ; but at night they changed to crimson, and she could imagine them to be the fires of great altars, fed from unknown depths, and leaping with their sudden, resplendent stag-horns of light into the black skies overhead. Silent and beautiful they were ; not fierce in any way ; the quick rose-flush that lit up the slates and the chimneys seemed a friendly thing ; the night was made less lonely. Was this a farewell

look, then? To-morrow she would be leaving those giant, silent, beautiful altar-flames far behind.

At random—for what few books were in the room were all of a religious cast—she had taken a volume from the top of a chest of drawers, and it was not until she returned to her place in the parlour below that she discovered what she had done. She had unwittingly brought with her the book of all the books in the house that she most dreaded—to wit, Paley's "Evidences of Christianity." There was a Free Library in Kirk o' Shields; Alison Blair had the curiosity naturally accompanying a mind at once acute and intrepid; little did her friends and acquaintances, still less her own immediate relatives, imagine how familiar she was with, and how eagerly she followed, the new speculations, problems, theories of these later times. Darwin, Huxley, Spencer were to her

more than mere names and echoes of names. But even to her all this modern intellectual movement was in a manner a distant thing ; it seemed to be happening in some other planet ; it had no relation to the actual facts of her own life. She could read an article on the Mosaic account of creation without seriously feeling that the authority of Scripture was being impugned. It was something that interested her in a vague kind of way, this discussion going on in that distant realm ; in nowise did it seem to affect the assured and abiding faith in revelation that she held in common with the people among whom she dwelt. To them this certain faith was all in all ; it was their one possession—a heavenly as well as an earthly possession ; holding fast by that, the poorest of them were richer than princes or kings ; death had no sting for them, hell no terrors ; an everlasting crown was before them ; washed in the

blood of the Lamb, and made white as snow, they would pass into the joy of their Lord. In works (as they were never tired of insisting to each other) there was no virtue ; works were carnal, and a snare to the soul ; in faith alone was saving grace ; and how, Alison might have asked herself, could these poor people around her, whose austere piety had something pathetic in it, even when they had “got assurance,” as the phrase was—how could they or this priceless belief of theirs be affected by what scientific men, and literary men, and statesmen, and others, were writing in magazines and reviews in the far-away city of London ?

And then there came a time—a chance phrase in an article had struck an unexpected chord—when her heart seemed to stand still for a moment. Was the Christian religion, then, but a passing phenomenon—similar to other phenomena that

had appeared in the world before and since—and with no higher sanction than its own lofty morality and purity of aim? The question was a startling one, but it did not terrify her. She had been brought up in an atmosphere of conviction. She had been accustomed to regard these writings and speculations as something quite apart from the present facts and conditions of life. Still, just by way of curiosity, perhaps, or to comfort herself by making assurance doubly sure, she thought she would make a patient study of Paley's "Evidences," which she had not read since she was a child of twelve.

Alas! this book did terrify her—for a time. Doubts that she had never dreamed of before—for her childish reading had been entirely perfunctory—were now presented to her mind; and they seemed to have a far more startling significance than the elaborate arguments which were meant

to resolve them. Why, on the very first page she read these strange words: "Suppose, nevertheless, almost the whole race, either by the imperfection of their faculties, the misfortune of their situation, or by the loss of some prior revelation, to want this knowledge, and not to be likely, without the aid of a new revelation, to attain it. . . ." Was, then, the history of God's dealings with mankind so much a matter of conjecture—was that portion of it included in the Christian revelation so small and temporary and fragmentary a thing—that one had to guess at some previous revelation rather than believe that countless generations of the sons of men had lived and died in ignorance and gone to their doom? This was but the beginning; her imagination, with a rapidity she could not control, would persist in asking further and further questions, and the only answer was a shuddering dread.

For she was quite alone. There was no one to whom she could go for guidance and help. Between her father and herself there was doubtless a measure, perhaps a considerable measure, of affection: he on his part regarding her with the natural instinct of protection and care; she on her part moved to deep admiration by his stern integrity of character. But that affection took no visible sign. An expression of it would have been regarded as more than a weakness, as something culpable, as putting the creature before the Creator: for was not all the love and gratitude of the human heart due to the Divine Father? And as between the Minister and his children there was no expression of affection, so there was no confidence. When Alison, in her first bewilderment and alarm, thought of her going to her father with these doubts, and perplexities, she could see his eyes afire with astonishment and

anger. No pity there, but wrath : what devil had entered into her?—why had she not striven and wrestled to cast him out forthwith? Was the Evil Spirit still vexing her? To her knees, then! in her own chamber—with prayer and fasting and supplication—till she could come to say she was restored and in her right mind.

There was Agnes, it is true; and between the two girls there was a devoted affection—though betraying itself in deeds more than in words—and a close confidence as well. But how was she to darken that fair young mind with her own morbid, and probably foolish, imaginings? Not even in her loneliest hours, when her soul in its agony seemed crying aloud for a single word of sympathy, could she go to her sister. Her sister?—who *knew* that their mother, dead these many years, sometimes came to see them in the mid

hours of the night, in the little room where they slept together. Again and again (so the younger girl averred, with eyes grown mystical and strange) she had seen the pale figure, gentle and smiling, who stood by the side of the bed and regarded her two children. Nay, she had heard her.

“I don’t know how it is, Ailie,” she would say, as the two sisters sat before the fire by themselves of a winter evening, “but I seem to hear her when she comes into the room. I cannot make out what the noise is, or whether it is a noise, but it is something I hear and know. It wakes me; and when I open my eyes I find her standing at the foot of the bed, and sometimes at the side, and quite near. And I’m not in the least afraid, she looks so kind; just the old way, Ailie, you remember, when she would meet us coming home from school? And some night I am going to say to her, ‘Mother, will ye

no waken Ailie too? for she hardly believes you come to see her.' ”

“Hush, hush, Aggie!” the elder sister would say; “you should not speak of such things, for they pass understanding; and I doubt whether father would not be angry if he were to hear.”

“Some night you will see for yourself,” the younger sister would say, and then fall into silence and reverie.

However, the paroxysm of alarm and uncertainty caused by Paley’s “Evidences of Christianity” was not of long duration. Alison put the book aside and would not open it again. These doubts were all too terrible; she shrank back from the appalling loneliness in which she found herself. Nay, she strove to convince herself that she had been properly punished for wandering away from the fold and following her own poor reason. Who was she, to set up her individual judgment against the authority

of the preachers and teachers in Israel? Paley himself was but a human being like any other; surely it was a perilous thing, in a matter of such supreme moment, to follow a fallible guide! Womanlike, she clung to the majority; and the majority—not to say the entire community—of those around her were possessed by a faith which, however sombre it might be, was at least unwavering and questionless. Paley's "Evidences" lay on the top of the chest of drawers in her room, and remained there untouched.

But it was not for long that on this evening she had to practise the harmless hypocrisy of holding the book open before her, while she would not allow herself to read a single disquieting word.

"Alison," said the Minister, presently, as he transferred the big Bible from his knees to the table, and drew in his chair, "ye may call in the weemen now."

Agnes went and got "the books;" and directly afterwards, the two women-servants of the household, summoned by Alison, came into the room. The younger of these was a stout, red-haired, freckled, black-eyed wench, whose apathetic manner seemed to suggest that she would be glad enough when this ordeal was over.

"Dod, but our Minister dings a'!" this buxom lass was used to say in confidence to her gossips. "He doesna gie the Lord a minute's peace. It's ask-asking and begging frae morning till nicht. I'm sure I hope it'll no be like my brither Jock at hame. When he gangs fishing on the Lernock—so the lads say—he keeps whuppin' and whuppin'—the water is never at rest for a second—and deil a sea-trout or a grilse does he e'er bring hame wi' him. Look at the Sawbath, Kirsty, woman, that they ca' a day o' rest. A day o' rest! There's faimily worship at nine, when a

body has scarcely got their breakfast swallowed; then the Minister he's off to the Young Men's Christian Association—that's at ten o'clock in the hall. Then there's the kirk itsel' at half-past eleeven; and the folk have hardly time to come out and look about them when it's in again at twa o'clock for anither couple o' hours. Then there's the Minister's Bible class at six, and faimily worship again at nine. Dod, I never saw the like! Weel, I suppose the Minister kens best. Sometimes the wean that keeps whingeing and whingeing * gets what it greets for. And sometimes," she would add, snappishly, "it gets a scud o' the side o' the head."

But the elder servant—a tall woman she was, dark-complexioned, and meagre of face—came into the room with a kind of furtive fear in her eyes. This woman—the solitary exception in this community—

* The child that keeps whimpering and whimpering.

was possessed by the dreadful conviction that she was not of the elect ; she was an outcast, consigned to everlasting punishment ; the scheme of salvation had no place for her ; and whatever portion of the Scripture might be read, the denunciations of the wicked could hardly be less terrible to her than descriptions of the eternal joys and glories from which she was hopelessly and for ever shut out. She was wholly reticent about this conviction of hers ; but it was well known. More than once Alison had unwittingly come upon the poor wretch when she was on her knees, appealing with passionate tears and sobs, not that she might be forgiven, and allowed to take the lowest place among the ransomed, but that she might be enabled to lift up her heart to the Lord in gratitude for all His goodness to her. She did not complain of her awful fate, or seek in any way to escape from it. It was the Lord's will ;

let Him be praised. And when Alison, shuddering to think of any human being going through life with this fearful doom continually before her, would say, "But, Margaret, what is the sin against the Holy Ghost? What is the unforgivable sin? You do not even know what it is!" she would shake her head in silence, or answer with her favourite text: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

"We will praise God by singing the eightieth Psalm," the Minister began; and when they had found their places, he himself started the tune—the old, familiar "Martyrdom" it was—which was at once taken up by the fresh, clear voices of the girls—

"Hear, Israel's Shepherd! Like a flock
Thou that dost Joseph guide:
Shine forth, O thou that dost between
The cherubims abide!
In Ephraim's and Benjamin's,
And in Manasseh's sight,
O come for our salvation:
Stir up thy strength and might.

“Turn us again, O Lord our God,
And upon us vouchsafe
To make thy countenance to shine
And so we shall be safe.
O Lord of hosts, almighty God,
How long shall kindled be
Thy wrath against the prayer made
By thine own folk to thee?”

The singing over, he opened the large Bible and proceeded to read the second chapter of the Book of Ruth—no doubt choosing the story of the young Moabitess who left her own country and went to live among an unknown people as having some reference to Alison and her departure on the morrow. And finally, when they all knelt down, and he engaged in prayer, his fervent appeal for Divine protection for this child of his who was going away into a strange land was even more personal and immediate than that he had preferred in open church. Not only so, but it was full of urgent and earnest admonition and exhortation addressed to herself. They

were no common and worldly dangers she was to dread ; these things were of little account ; in this transitory space of time called life, sickness and sorrow, trouble and disease and death itself, were but trivial accidents. It was the far more deadly peril that the Christian soul might have to encounter that was to be feared—the insidious attacks of Satan—pride of heart, the allurements of the eye, frivolity, forgetfulness that every moment of time was of value in preparing for the Judgment-day of the Lord. And then he spoke of her going forth alone—and yet not alone ; and his last words were words of consolation : “ Behold he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is thy keeper : the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil : he shall preserve thy soul. The Lord shall preserve

thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore."

Worship concluded, the women went their several ways, leaving the Minister to finish up his reading and put out the lights. And soon silence and sleep had fallen over the whole household—bringing to the poor creature Margaret, it is to be hoped, some temporary and blessed forgetfulness of the awful doom for ever before her waking eyes; and to Agnes Blair, perhaps, the mystic vision of a gentle and smiling mother, standing by her bedside and regarding her with a wistful affection; while as for Alison, it is to be imagined that her dreams were most likely to be of the far country she was about to enter, when she had left behind her the turmoil and din and lowering skies, the rigid observances, the monotonous duties, the incessant and morbid introspection, the cramped and fettered life of Kirk o' Shields.

CHAPTER II.

THE BIT LADY.

LEAGUE upon league of glassy calm, save where some wandering puff of wind stirred the still sea into a deeper blue; the long green island of Lismore basking in the sun, and tapering away to its southernmost point, where the small white light-house stands; the hills of Morven, in hues of faint rose-gray and lilac, grown distant in the heat; close by, the winding shores of the main-land, with wooded knolls, and crags, and bays where the shallow water showed the sand below: this was the picture that Alison saw all around her as the great steamer thundered and throbbed

away northward through the fair, summer-like day. Surely here was a new heaven and a new earth—after Kirk o' Shields. And brilliant and beautiful as it was, it was all so restful. On board the steamer, it is true, the sunlight burned hot on the white deck, and on the scarlet funnels, and on the crimson velvet cushions beside her ; but she could turn her bewildered eyes away from this overpowering blaze, and let them dwell gratefully on the wide blue spaces of the sea, and on the hills that had grown almost ethereal in the haze produced by fine weather, and on a sky that down at the horizon-line in the south had scarcely any colour in it at all. A day of pale azure and silver it was ; calm and shining and clear ; there was not anywhere overhead a single fleecy flake to throw a patch of purple shadow on the far-stretching and resplendent plain.

By the air around her suddenly be-

coming warmer, she guessed that the steamer was lessening its speed; and presently, when the great paddles had been stopped and then reversed, driving a mass of white, seething foam down into the clear bottle-green water, she found they were alongside Port Appin pier. With a natural curiosity, for she was a stranger in a strange land, she was scanning the small group of people assembled to meet their friends or their packages (and perhaps she was contrasting the fresh complexions and trim and trig adornment of one or two of the Highland lasses there with the too-familiar appearance of the bareheaded, tartan-shawled, worn-faced women who made up the bulk of the female population of Kirk o' Shields), when her eye happened to light on a new-comer, who was hastening down to the boat. He was a young man, and not over middle height; but there was something effective and pic-

turesque in the set of his strongly built frame, in the carriage of his head, and even in the long and easy and careless stride with which he came down the quay. He was none too soon ; indeed the hawsers had been cast off and the gangway withdrawn when he stepped, or leaped, on to the paddle-box. He turned for a moment to wave his hand to one or two companions who had come as far as the head of the pier with him ; then he entered into conversation with the captain, the two of them being apparently very good friends.

She was sitting here alone and observant ; and she seemed to perceive a peculiar sunniness (so to speak) and cheerfulness in this young man's look and bearing. Also she was aware that he had singularly clear eyes ; for once or twice they were turned in her direction, and instantly she had to drop her own. For

the rest, his costume was novel to her. Sportsmen have no occasion to go wandering along the grimy streets of Kirk o' Shields. She had never seen anybody in knickerbockers; and the simple and serviceable garb—laced boots and Highland hose, a homespun shooting-jacket, a Tam o' Shanter drawn forward over his brow, a bit of red silk tie showing under his flannel shirt-collar—seemed somehow to suit the easy self-possession of his manner. Then he had the complexion of one familiar with the sun and sea-air; fair as he was, his skin was a trifle darker than his short, twisted yellow moustache. Dandyfied?—perhaps a little. And yet there was a manly look about the breadth of his shoulders; he had a flat back, a well-knit calf, and small ankle; and always there was a kind of pride in the poise of his head. He was laughing and talking with the captain, but he was looking around at

the same time ; more than once she had to swiftly lower her eyes.

It was about a couple of minutes thereafter—and to her astonishment and dismay—that she found this young man approaching her. She knew, rather than saw, that he touched his cap.

“ I beg your pardon, but may I ask if you are Miss Blair ? ”

She ought to have been still further startled ; but the sound of his voice was pleasant to the ear.

“ Y—yes,” she said, glancing timidly upward.

“ I know your friends in Fort William,” said he, “ and they asked me to look after you, and get your luggage ashore for you. Of course they will be down at the quay ; but I will see your things got ready, if you will let me, so that you won’t have any trouble.”

“ Oh, thank you,” said she, hardly knowing what to say.

“I understand you have not been in the Highlands before,” he continued ; and with the greatest coolness he sat down beside her on the velvet cushion, and laid his arm on the gunwale of the steamer.

“No,” she answered ; but all the time she was asking herself what had enabled him to identify her. Was there some Kirk o’ Shields peculiarity in her dress or appearance ?

“You are lucky in having such a beautiful day for your first glimpse of them,” he went on to say, with much placid assurance. “It isn’t always like this. Those hills over there—Kingairloch that is—and those away up yonder, by Inversanda and Ardgour—they are not nearly so far away as they seem to be ; it is the haze of the settled weather that makes them appear distant. That is Shuna island : do you see the old castle ? Why, there’s a seal—look !”

She turned her eyes in the direction indicated, and could make out a round dark object on the pale, blue-white plain.

“I shouldn’t wonder if that is the old fellow that goes backward and forward after the ferry-boat between Port Appin and Lismore. He is a friendly old chap; I dare say he has followed us so far just for the sake of company. There—he’s down—off again, I suppose, for Appin.”

Presently he said—perhaps casting back a little—

“I hope you will pardon my bluntness in addressing you, but, you see, I had made pretty sure. I had a good look round, though I fixed on you from the first. You seem surprised? Well, I had heard you described so often, you know. Your Aunt Gilchrist is never done talking about you, and she told me again and again how I should recognize you. ‘And when you see her’—this was her last

message when I was coming away—‘tell “the bit lady” that I am just wearying for her.’ That is what she always calls you—‘the bit lady.’”

“It was a childish nickname,” Alison said quickly, with her pale face and forehead showing some brief colour of embarrassment.

“Oh, I know,” said he, with a careless good-humour; “I know quite well. I have had the minutest descriptions of you at a very early age indeed. I have heard a good deal about ‘the bit lady,’ who was so prim, and precise, and accurate in her speech, and dignified in her manner. Oh yes, and very fierce she was in correcting rude boys, I understand. I have heard, too, of her remonstrating with the servants about their grammar; and of her repetition of ‘Fetual Calling’; and of her tame sparrow that was scolded because it wouldn’t speak.”

Alison grew more and more embarrassed ; it was so strange to find a perfectly unknown person so intimately acquainted with her early years, and on such familiar speaking-terms with herself. She managed to interrupt him by asking how her Aunt Gilchrist was.

“ Oh, very well indeed. Last night she was in the highest of spirits. I suppose she was rid for the time of her rheumatism, or whatever the mysterious ailment is that she makes such fun of when it isn't there ; and she made the old Doctor suffer. But he doesn't mind much. For all their quarrelling, I never knew two sweethearts half so fond of each other as the Doctor and his sister are. If he scolds her the one moment he is petting her the next. And I am sure that both he and his wife, and all the family indeed, are remarkably good-natured so far as you are concerned ; for your Aunt Gilchrist makes not the

slightest secret that she is going to leave her money to you—or the most of it ; and yet they don't seem jealous ; they tease her about it quite openly ; and I think you will find they will make you as welcome as the old lady herself. You haven't seen much of them ? ”

“ Of my uncle's family ? ” said Alison—and now she was growing less embarrassed, for this young man seemed so pleasant, and natural, and unaffected in manner ; and moreover he appeared to know all about her kinsfolk. “ No, not very much ; only when they came once or twice to see my Aunt Gilchrist in Edinburgh.” And then she added, glancing up at him for a second, “ Is Flora as pretty as ever ? ”

“ Miss Flora,” said he, “ is quite the belle of Fort William, as she lets all of us know. And as light-hearted as ever, I need not tell you that. By the way, I suppose you know what she calls you ?

Haven't you heard? She calls you Miss Dimity Puritan."

For the first time a bit of a smile hovered round Alison's mouth, though her eyes were as usual downcast.

"I seem to have various names in Fort William," she remarked.

"But they are all given to you in kindness, any way," he answered. "Oh, I assure you that your coming is considered to be a very great affair; and I look on myself as very fortunate in being your escort even this little bit of the way."

He could not say any more at present, for the steamer was slowing into Ballachulish pier; and Alison was much interested in watching the people land and set out by coach for Glencoe. She had risen now from her seat, and when she addressed remarks or questions to the young man who was by her side, it never occurred to Miss Dimity Puritan that she

was talking to a person whose very name she did not know. He seemed to belong to that family in Fort William—to her uncle's family. Then he was not obtrusive in his attentions ; he was at her command—no more ; and besides, his voice was soft and musical and pleasant to listen to. He tried to get her to say *Balla-chaolish*, but she only laughed a little and declined.

Presently they set out northward again ; and he told her the names of the various mountains—those giant masses whose sterile altitudes, rising far above the sparsely wooded slopes and precipices, seemed to recede away from human ken ; although along their base, here and there, was some narrow strip of cultivation—a field with the hay gathered into cocks (for, summer-like as the day was, they were now at the end of August), or a patch of yellowing corn just over the deep sapphire of the sea. Then, when they had got

through the Narrows of Corran, they came in sight of the mighty bulk of Ben Nevis, towering high above the lower hills of bracken and heather, its vast shoulders of granite seamed with rose-pink scaurs, that caught a warm glow from the now westering sun. A brisk breeze had sprung up by this time from the north or north-west, driving the sea around them into a vivid blue; and far away beyond these lapping waters, on the shore, amid some soft green foliage, were two or three white dots of houses: these were the outskirts of Fort William.

While as yet they were a long way from the quay, he said—

“Your cousins have come down.”

“Can you make them out at so great a distance?” she said, in some wonderment.

“Oh, well,” he made answer, apologetically, “there are things that help you. I can see Miss Flora’s sailor hat and dark

dress. Then the tall lad by her side must be Hugh. Then the boy with the wheelbarrow—that, of course, is Johnny.”

“But who is Johnny?” she asked, for she had no cousin of that name.

“Oh, you don’t know Johnny? Johnny works in the garden, and sails the boat, and does anything else he is driven to do. Besides that, he is a person of the keenest sense of humour. I know what he is thinking of at this moment. He is looking at this steamer, and wishing she might go on the rocks.”

“But why?” said Alison, with open eyes.

“That he might have the fun of seeing us all struggling in the water,” her companion remarked, calmly. “He is really a very humorous lad. But I am afraid I shall have to make a horsewhip curl round Master Johnny’s legs if he doesn’t put some restraint on his passion for setting

living things, no matter what, to fight each other. He is too anxious to get at the survival of the fittest all at once. Nature works by slow methods; Johnny is far too impatient. And then he has a habit of destroying the survivor—which is exceedingly unfair, and unphilosophical too.”

“What an inhuman young wretch!” she said.

“Oh no. It’s only his playful humour. He lives such a monotonous life—grubbing up weeds, sitting at the tiller, baiting night-lines, and so on. It is very hard. Here he has been several years in Fort William, and constantly in sight of the quay, and never once has a steamer burst her boilers and blown herself into the air. Well, now, will you come and show me your luggage? We shall be there directly.”

Indeed there was little luggage to look after; and when Johnny came on board (Alison regarded this stout, heavy-

shouldered lump of a boy, with his broad, grinning face, and small, twinkling eyes, and wondered whether he was thinking it would be an excellent joke to drop her portmanteau into the sea) her few things were speedily transferred ashore and put on the barrow. At the same time Alison, followed by the young man whose acquaintance she had made, passed along the gangway ; and no sooner had she stepped on to the quay than she was caught hold of by her cousin (a handsome and strapping young lady this was, fresh-complexioned, with dark blue eyes and black hair ; her costume of serge, with a straw hat showing a band of red ribbon) and heartily kissed on both cheeks and made welcome. It was a form of embrace unknown, or at least not practised, in Kirk o' Shields ; Alison was blushing a little as she released herself, and turned to her other cousin—a tall young lad of eighteen or twenty, who

eyed her somewhat askance—and offered him her hand.

“I’m glad you got a good day for the sail,” he said, rather bashfully. “I suppose you will go right on to the house now with Flora. Ludovick,” he added, addressing the young man with the twisted yellow moustache and clear light eyes, “will you come along to the building-shed? I want you to look at the belaying-pins; I think Campbell has got them all wrong.”

“Indeed no,” said Miss Flora, promptly. “Ludovick is coming with us: aren’t you, Ludovick? And—and this is my cousin, Alison——”

“We formed a little acquaintanceship on board the steamer,” said he, pleasantly. “And I know Miss Blair’s name; but I’m afraid she doesn’t know mine.”

“Alison,” said Miss Flora at once, “let me introduce to you Captain Macdonell

—a great friend of ours; that is why we asked him to look after you and see about your luggage, when we knew he was going down to Appin. Come, let us be off home; Aunt Gilchrist will be *wearying* for you, as she says. Look at Hugh!” the young lady continued, sending a farewell glance after her brother as they left the quay. “Isn’t he glad to be rid of us! He thought I would insist on marching him back to tea; and of course he couldn’t refuse, with his cousin just come ashore. But now he’s off to stand about among damp shavings, and gaze and gaze at the wonderful boat that is all of his own designing. And precious glad he is to be rid of us girls, I know; oh, you’ll find out soon enough, Alison, what he thinks of us all. Useless creatures, every one. We can’t do anything right. We can’t throw a stone straight; we can’t sharpen a pencil, or shut a door, or do anything as it ought

to be done ; when we jump from a wall we light on our heels ; we can't trim a boat when she's sailing—goodness gracious ! he shifts us about just as if we were ballast, and an ounce one way or another is all our fault ; and we'd run away from a cow if it wasn't for shame. If you only knew the contempt he has for us ! I wonder what he is thinking of you, Ludovick : you might be standing gazing at that marvellous boat instead of going home to drink tea with a lot of women.”

“ He'll pay for all this,” Ludovick Macdonell observed, shrewdly. “ He will sing another tune some day. All at once an angel will appear on earth—not from the clouds, but out of a finishing-school, most likely, and everything will be transformed and transfigured. And then to walk along the beach with her, her long yellow hair blown about by the sea-wind—just think of the magic of it ; and the

dreams of doing extraordinary things for her sake—becoming a great poet, or taking the Queen's prize at Wimbledon, or something of that kind. There will be no more contempt then—not at all; rather an indiscriminate affection and esteem for any one so privileged as to belong to the same sex as the wonderful and adorable creature——”

“No, no, no, Ludovick,” said Miss Flora, shaking her head; “you will never find Hugh transmogrified like that. Ask his opinion of any girl, no matter who she is. If you say she has pretty fair hair, he says, ‘Look at her piggy eyelashes.’ If you say she sings well, he says, ‘Yes, when by chance she hits the key.’ If you praise her figure, he says, ‘I hate draggletails; can’t she use a needle and thread instead of fixing up her dress with a pin?’ Fancy a boy noticing a thing like that! What business has he with pins and-

needles and thread, and sarcastic comments about mirrors and making-up? No, there is no beauty in us that he should desire us," she continued, with a careless—and probably inadvertent—use of Scriptural phraseology that considerably startled Alison. "We'll have to set my cousin here to see if she can do anything with him; it is the quiet ones who do the most mischief."

By this time they had passed along the straggling street of the little town—with its whitewashed cottages, and small general stores, and banks, and inns, and churches—and were out in the southern suburbs, where a number of detached villas, set among pretty gardens, overlooked the beach. It was all a fairy-land to the wistful-eyed stranger from Kirk o' Shields—that beautiful panorama of sea, and wooded slopes, and far-reaching mountains; while here, close at hand, every-

thing seemed so fresh and clean and bright in the sunlight, and the air was sweet with the scent blown from the gardens. At one of the small gates her companions stopped, and she was invited to enter. She passed in by a little gray-pebbled path, and found herself in a wilderness—in a very trim wilderness, it is true—of old-fashioned flowers: nasturtiums, dahlias, pansies, marigolds, all set in plots and borders; while, as she glanced towards the house, she perceived that the front wall of it was hanging with white roses and the pendulous crimson bells of the tree-fuchsia. But she had not much time to examine the villa itself—which was exceedingly smart, none the less, with its facings of brown stone, and its gables, and its green Venetian blinds; for in the porch, and smiling a blithe welcome, was the imperious little dame who had summoned her thither. When Alison went forward, she found

herself seized by both hands, and held at arm's-length, by this bright-complexioned, silver-haired, pleasant-eyed small person, who subjected her to a keen and yet not unkindly scrutiny.

“And how's the bit lady?—let's see how she's looking?” the old dame said, in accents that were more familiar to Alison than the gently modulated Highland speech; for Mrs. Gilchrist had lived many of the years of her life in Edinburgh. “Oh, none so ill, to have come out o' that awfu' town—none so ill. I wonder ye can live in it at all; I never see it but I think o' the bad place. I'm sure if the bad place is any worse than Kirk o' Shields, I peety the poor folk that are to be sent there. And how's my brother-in-law the Minister, Alison?—and that frail-looking young lassie, your sister?”

“They're very well indeed, Aunt Gilchrist,” Alison said. “And I am sure

they thought it very kind of you to ask me to come and stay with you for a while."

"Yes ; but did they *say* the like ?" she said, with a laugh. "Na, na, they're dour folk in Kirk o' Shields ; they dinna speak what's in their mind. And there you are, just as ever, you bigoted wee Puritan, with your stubborn gray eyes ; and nothing in the wide world would induce you to say they sent me a friendly word or a message—though ye might tell a bit o' a white lee just for the sake o' civility."

"I am sure they thought it very kind of you all the same, Aunt Gilchrist," said Miss Dimity Puritan, "even if they didn't send you any formal message."

"Well, well, come indoors, or your Aunt Munro will be jealous. I think she has' gone upstairs to see your things put right. Flora will show you the way—and there's to be tea in the back garden directly, as I hear."

“And I’ve brought you the illustrated papers, Mrs. Gilchrist,” said the young militia captain, coming forward dutifully.

“Uncut, I suppose,” said she, glancing at the bundle. “Well, Captain Ludovick, you and I will go away and take our places at the table; and then you can get a knife and cut the edges for me, for I’m a poor old woman, and hate trouble.”

They passed through the house and into the back garden, where there was a round table covered with a white cloth, and amply bespread. All kinds of cake were there, and soda-scones, short-bread, marmalade, black-currant jam, and the like: the Findon haddocks and the tea had not yet been summoned. This enclosed space behind the house sloped abruptly upward; and there was a winding path to the summit of the grassy knoll, where the afternoon sun burned in golden light; but down here there was a cool and pleasant shadow, and

quietude for the eyes. However, Mrs. Gilchrist did not occupy herself with the illustrated papers when he had cut the edges for her.

“So you managed to make her out on board the steamer?” said she to the young man, who had laid aside his Tam o’ Shanter—revealing thereby how light his complexion was; for there was a well-marked division between the clear hue of the upper portion of his forehead and that of the rest of his face, which was browned by the sun.

“Within two minutes of our leaving Appin pier,” answered Captain Ludovick. “I recognized her the moment I saw her.”

“And what do you think of her?”

“I think she is extremely pretty,” said he.

“No, d’ye really think that!” said Aunt Gilchrist, with affected surprise; but the kind old dame’s face had involuntarily lit

up with pleasure at this praise of her *protégée*. “D’ye really think that now? For I shouldna have thought it was her good looks that would have recommended her to folk. She’s got her mother’s eyes, it is true; and there wasna a bonnier lass than my sister Ailie in a’ the length and breadth o’ Stirlingshire. And the bit creature has pretty hair too, if she wasna so prim about it. Flora will have to pull it about for her, and put her in the fashion. Maybe it’s living in that bottomless pit o’ a place that has kept her so pale; but it’s a natural complexion too—mind that; it’s no ill health—not a bit.”

“I know this,” said he, with some decision; “you may say what you please about her features, or her complexion, or the colour of her hair, but one thing is certain, you would never pass her by unnoticed. There is something particularly distinguished about her—something unusual

—something that tells you in a moment she is not like the other strangers who may be around her, on board a steamer or anywhere else. Perhaps it is the self-possession of her manner—a kind of dignity, and simplicity as well.”

“Ay, do ye say that now?—do ye say that?” said the bright little dame, with much obvious pleasure. “Well, here she comes for herself. Here’s my bit lady! Come away, you Lanarkshire lassie, and let’s see whether the Highland air has made you hungry. Here, take this chair next me: that’s where you’re to sit whenever you and I are at the same table. And if your Aunt Munro is jealous, you must just tell her that Highland kinship is stronger than Scotch, and that you’ve Highland blood in your veins, for all you were born in that wearyfu’ hole o’ fire and smoke.”

“I’m sure, Jane,” said Aunt Munro,

who was a tall, bland, well-featured, Scotch-looking woman, with mild eyes, and an expression of great gentleness—"I'm sure, Jane, none of us will quarrel with you for being kind to Alison."

And very kind, indeed, they all of them were to her ; and a very merry little party this was, assembled down here in the grateful shade, while the afternoon light shone yellow on the crest of the knoll above them. The old lady was in especially gay spirits. Perhaps she was pleased that her *protégée* had won the high approval of the only stranger who had as yet seen her ; perhaps she was looking forward with much content to having this constant companion to pet and tyrannize over ; at all events, she was very cheerful and merry, and full of quips and jests and good-humoured raillery. And most of all did her gibes fall on the absent Doctor.

"Oh, they're fine fellows, they doctors,

with their long words that they hide themselves behind. That's how they escape ; when you've got them in a corner, and bade them declare their ignorance, they just jump through a big door and shut it in your face—a big door of three or four syllables, in Latin or Greek, and there you're left helpless. Look at me, Alison Blair. How big am I ? I couldn't take a prize at a show of dolls ! But bless ye, this braw doctor of an uncle o' yours would make ye believe I had a whole pharmacopœia of ailments in my wee body. I have a bit twinge in my toes sometimes, or along my fingers—just nothing it is—but you should hear the Doctor ! It's peripheral neuralgia one day ; it's neureetis the next ; and rheumatic gout the next ; and I'm not to take this and I'm not to take that—especially sugar. Alison, reach me the bowl.”

Alison passed the sugar-bowl to the old

lady, who forthwith took out a goodly piece, and with a determined air plumped it into the large cup of tea before her.

“That’s for periphery!” she said.

She took out another piece and plumped it in.

“And *that’s* for neureetis!” she said.

She took a third piece and plumped it in.

“And *that’s* for rheumatic gout—and my compliments to the whole three o’ them!”

“Well, Aunt Gilchrist,” said Flora’s mother, with a good-natured smile, “I don’t think it’s the sugar the Doctor objects to as much as the port-wine. But ye may say what ye like of him, for if he is my husband, he is your brother.”

“Oh, he’s an honest man, the Doctor—as far as a doctor can be,” said Aunt Gilchrist. “And I’m thinking, Alison, you and I will be for taking him away from his patients for a day or two now and

again—to give the poor creatures a chance of getting better. There's many a fine drive about here, and Mr. Carmichael has a most comfortable waggonette; and we must take ye down Glenfinnan, and show ye where Prince Charlie first met the clans; and out to Spean Bridge too, and up Glen Nevis. It's a grand place, Fort William, for being in the middle of things. And then some day we must have a sail up the Caledonian Canal to Inverness; and there I'll get ye a brooch of Scotch pebbles, or cairngorms, or something of that kind, for your neck. Black and white's very trim and neat—oh yes, I find no fault; very prim and trim and nice ye look; but it's not enough for a young lassie. Flora will come with us, and we'll get you some pretty ribbons and neckerchiefs and things to busk ye up a bit."

Indeed she was just full of all kinds of generous schemes and projects; and

though Alison was the chief figure in them, the old lady had a thought for her other relations as well. Flora was to have this and that; she would bring Hugh a book of salmon-flies; she even meant to surprise the Doctor with a present of a silver-headed walking-stick, with a snuff-box in the head; and finally she bade the young folk go away and amuse themselves, warning Alison to come back with a good appetite for the nine-o'clock supper, for the Doctor would be present with his severely scrutinizing eye.

"And now, Ludovick," said Flora, when the three younger people (Hugh had gone off to his studies) passed through the house, and were in the front garden, "what are we to do?"

"We can't go sailing, that is very certain," said he, looking away across the still sea-loch towards Stroncreggan and Cona-glen.

Certain enough it was ; for the afternoon had settled down into an absolute calm, and the water was like glass. The various features of the hills and mountains opposite were all repeated on the flawless mirror ; and in the midst of this inverted world floated motionless a schooner-yacht, a brown-sailed smack, and a steam-launch—the yellow masts of the schooner and the white funnel of the launch sending long reflections down until they almost touched the shore. Sailing was out of the question.

“ Then let us show Alison Fort William,” said Flora. “ She ought to begin at the beginning. She hasn’t seen half the place yet.” So the three of them stepped down into the road and set out for the town ; the golden afternoon shining all around them ; the still air warm, and sweet with the fragrance of these suburban gardens.

Peace reigns in Fort William now.

Lochiel has no trouble with his clansmen ; the Government have no trouble with Lochiel ; the garrison buildings have been turned into private dwellings ; women sit on the grassy bastions of the fort and knit stockings, sheltering themselves from the sun with an old umbrella ; in the square are wooden benches for looking on at the tossing of the caber, putting the stone, and other Highland games ; in the fosse is grown an excellent crop of potatoes and cabbages ; and just outside there is a trimly kept bowling-green, in which the club-members practise the gentle art of reaching the tee when the waning afternoon releases them from their desk or counter. Indeed it is possible that Alison, who had visited Edinburgh once or twice, and had passed the lofty crags and castle walls of Stirling, may have been disappointed to find a place of fair historic fame with so little to show for itself ; but if Fort William

is not in itself picturesque, it is in the very midst of wonderfully picturesque surroundings. When they took her along to "the Craigs," and ascended the mound there, she was struck dumb by the singular and varied and luminous beauty of the vast panorama extending away in every direction. The wild hills of Lochaber were all aflame in the sunset light; dark amid trees stood the ruins of Inverlochy Castle; the shallow waters before her stretched away up to Corpach, where a flood of golden radiance came pouring out of Loch Eil; while all along the west, and as far south as Ardgour, the mountains were deepening and deepening in shadow, making the glow in the sky overhead all the more dazzlingly brilliant. Alison, standing somewhat apart from her companions, and wholly silent and absent, was wistfully wishing that her younger sister could be here for but an hour, for but a

moment. Would it not enrich those pale visions of hers which formed so large a portion of her life? Perhaps her imagination was starved in so cold and colourless a place as Kirk o' Shields? And might there not be in heaven high hills like these, flame-smitten with rose and gold, and placid lakes reflecting their awful and silent splendour? The Lord had made man in His own image; was it not possible that in fashioning the earth He had given us glimpses of that distant and mystic region which to poor Agnes seemed so white and wan? Why should it be white and wan? The Lord was the King of glory. "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle." Some strange kind of exaltation filled her heart, and flooded her eyes with

tears. Those roseate summits seemed so far away ; they were hardly of this earth ; they were God's footstool, removed beyond the habitations and the knowledge of men. "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?" When her cousin Flora came quickly forward in alarm, for she had happened to see the tears running down the girl's face, she found Alison all trembling, and quite unable to speak.

"Why, what is the matter?" said she, and she put her arm within Alison's arm ; and perhaps she guessed a little. "Come, come," said she kindly, "you must not let a pretty evening in the Highlands bewilder you. I'm sure I beg your pardon for leaving you to yourself for a minute or two : Ludovick and I are so deeply interested about our new tennis-court. Come away, and we will show you the river Nevis ; and then we shall have to be back in good time for supper, you know,

.

or else both papa and Aunt Gilchrist will be for tearing us in pieees." And so she led Alison away, and talked to her unceasingly, with plenty of help from Captain Macdonell; so that long before they had returned to the house the girl had quite recovered her ordinary serenity, and was listening with an equal amount of amusement and of horror to a recital of some of the doings of the boy John.

But, as it happened, they had lingered so long by the banks of the clear-running Nevis, that when they reached home again they were no less than ten minutes late; and the reception they got—not from the mild-eyed and soft-mannered Mrs. Munro, nor yet from the little, prim, gray-whiskered Doctor, but from Aunt Gilchrist herself—was of the sharpest. She who had been all milk-and-honey in the afternoon was now a fiery little scorpion; and no one was safe from her grumblings and mutter-

ings and biting innuendoes. It was not only the real culprits who suffered, as they all sat down at table ; there was a thrust here and a thrust there ; nothing, indeed, in the town of Fort William was right ; there were not even two clocks in the place that kept the same time. For a while the little Doctor fretted and fumed in silence ; at length he said, petulantly—

“I wish, Jane, you would pay some heed to what one tells you, and get rid of that neureetis ; for as long as it keeps hanging about ye, ye do nothing but grumble at the whole mortal world.”

“Get rid of it !” she said, with bitter scorn. “Yes, if you can tell me what it is, and what brought it there, and what’s going to cure it ! The more o’ that poison o’ yours I take—your iodides and salicine and stuff—the worse it gets ; and then ye jink round the corner and call it by another

name. I wonder," she went on contemptuously, "ye havena tried conjuring, or spirit-rapping, or reading a verse of the Bible backward! What kind o' tune is it they whistle to make serpents dance? Could ye no try that, Duncan, my man, when your bits o' bottles three times a day winna help?"

"If you'd take your medicine," said he, with some acerbity, "and leave alone that port-wine negus and cinnamon and sugar, you'd have a better chance of getting well—ay, and of improving your temper besides, Aunt Gilchrist, let me tell you."

"And if I have found out the only thing that gives me a little relief, I'm sure it was no doctor who made the discovery for me!" she retorted.

"I should think not!" he said, with glooming brows. "He that will to Cupar maun to Cupar. And the relief you get at the time, or fancy you get, d'you no think

you'll have to pay for that? What are you laying up for yourself?"

"What am I laying up for myself?" she answered snappishly. "'Deed, man, ye talk as if I was going to live for another half century! Laying up for myself? I dinna care what I'm laying up for myself, so that I can get an occasional five minutes' peace and quiet; and that I have never got from any of your precious tablespoonfuls three times a day. Laying up for myself? Would ye talk like that if ye felt the whole o' your ten toes on fire, and more fire shooting across your ankles? I'm thinking, Duncan, my lad, ye'd be just as quick as any one to take whatever would still the pain; and ye'd not be so anxious about squeezing in another miserable year or two between yourself and your coffin. And ye speak about my temper! My temper! Why, if ye get a bit twinge o' the toothache, it's like bringing the heavens and the earth to an end!"

She relapsed into silence and sulked. He also relapsed into silence and sulked ; and what conversation ensued was carried on between Captain Macdonell and Flora and Hugh. Alison observed that her Aunt Munro, so far from betraying any embarrassment over this quarrelling, seemed rather to be amused, in her quiet way, and did not seek to interfere.

Now the nine-o'clock supper was the chief meal of the household—the Doctor being away most of the day, and uncertain as to his movements—and on the table there was a decanter of claret and also one of whiskey, while there was a jug of beer brought in for the two young men. When the question of drinking came along, Mrs. Munro pressed her sister-in-law to have some claret ; but the offer was coldly, yet firmly, declined. Aunt Gilchrist would take a little water, please. The Doctor pretended to neither see nor hear.

“Duncan,” said his wife, “it has been a long and a hot day for you; would you like some soda-water with your whiskey?”

He did not answer. He got up and rang the bell. A maid-servant appeared at the door.

“Catherine, bring some hot water—some boiling water—and some ground cinnamon, and a lemon.”

Then he went to the sideboard and brought out a toddy-tumbler, a wineglass, and a dark bottle. Aunt Gilchrist would take no notice of his proceedings. Mrs. Munro was talking to Alison; Flora was talking to Ludovick Macdonell. And meanwhile, the servant having returned, the little Doctor standing at the sideboard was brewing a large beaker of port-wine negus.

Presently he brought the steaming tumbler, and the small silver ladle, and the wineglass round the table and put them before his sister.

“ I will not take it ! ” she said shortly.

“ Ye *will* take it ! ” said he.

“ I tell ye, I will *not* take it ! ” she maintained fiercely.

“ And I tell ye, ye *will* take it ! ” he insisted, with equal vehemence.

“ I will *not* take it, not a drop, while I am in this house ; and *that* will not be long ! ” said she, in a very high and mighty manner.

Alison left her seat, and came round and put her hand on her aunt’s shoulder. The old dame shook her off.

“ Go away ! ”

“ Aunt Gilchrist ! ” said Alison.

The girl had a soft and winning voice. Aunt Gilchrist looked up for a moment and patted Alison’s hand.

“ Well, well, what is it ? What does the bit lady want ? ”

“ I want you to take the negus, Aunt Gilchrist, ” Alison said.

Aunt Gilchrist stared defiantly at her brother.

“He has put no sugar in it,” said she.

The doctor went and fetched the sugar, and dropped one piece into the rose-coloured fluid.

“That’s only for periphery,” said she, discontentedly.

“Oh, well, you stiff-necked woman ! there’s another for deficient circulation, and here’s another for muscular rheumatism : will that do for ye ? ” said he, with a constrained laugh ; and when he had plumped the two pieces into the hot negus he went back to his place.

“They Highland folk ! ” said Mrs. Munro, with a quiet smile, to Alison. “Their temper is just like a pickle tow brought near a candle. Decent Scotch bodies like you and me, Alison, try to keep some reasonable control over themselves.”

Now, whether it was that this yielding on the part of her brother had pleased her, or whether it was that the stimulus of the hot negus did really afford her some assuagement of her wandering nerve-twinges, the old lady's mood was almost instantly changed. She grew most complacent and merry ; she declared she would soon teach the Doctor how to cure nervous inflammation, so that neuritis and peripheral neuralgia and all the rest of the crew would simply fly at his approach—especially if he came with a tumbler of port-wine negus in his hand ; she returned to the bold and generous undertakings and projects of the afternoon ; and she challenged her brother to show his faith in his assistant by leaving him in full charge of the patients for a few days. When the supper-things were removed she insisted on Ludovick Macdonell lighting his pipe—which he was very loath to do, for

no one smoked except himself; but she declared that the odour of tobacco in the evening was sweeter to her than the scent of roses, for it reminded her of happy days long gone by. And then (just as Alison was expecting to see "the books" brought in for family worship) Aunt Gilchrist announced in her tyrannical way that they must have a comfortable little game of "catch-the-ten."

"Aunt Gilchrist!" said Flora, with a laugh, by way of protest.

"Well, then?"

"What will Miss Dimity Puritan say to our playing cards?" Flora asked, with a look at her cousin.

"The bit lady? Indeed I forgot!" said the old dame, glancing doubtfully across the table. "But never mind; we'll not ask her to play. Alison will come and sit by me, and I'll show her the game."

And so it was that Alison (though with some compunction, for she had been taught to regard "the devil's books" as one of Satan's most dangerous and deadly devices) found herself looking on at this game, which, after a little preliminary instruction as to the names and values of the cards, she managed to understand in a fashion. And not only was there no apparent wickedness, but she found herself equally amused and interested. In the very first hand it fell to her aunt's lot to hold the ten of trumps; and the various efforts made by the other players to seize this treasure Alison was sharp enough to guess at. What she did not know was that Ludovick Macdonell, who had a suspicion as to where the Ten lay, intentionally and good-naturedly sacrificed his chance of capturing it by prematurely throwing away his Jack—to Aunt Gilchrist's exuberant joy and triumph—for ultimately she won

the game. This evening Alison kept out—pleading her ignorance; but she was a reasonable and even a clear-headed kind of creature, when she was withdrawn from certain surroundings and influences; and she could not, for the life of her, make out wherein lay the harm of this simple pastime. For the rest, a great cheerfulness and frankness and good-humour prevailed in the little circle; it was astonishing how quickly the time went by; she was quite startled and sorry when Captain Ludovick, at the end of a game, rose and said he must really bid them good night and be off to his hotel. Indeed she was disappointed: he seemed to belong to this household; she would rather he could have remained until the family party finally broke up.

As he was saying good-bye, and when he came to her, he took her hand for a second.

"I hope you will be pleased with your stay in Lochaber," he said.

"Ludovick," Miss Flora interposed, "you are not going back to Oyre just yet?"

"Oh no," he said, "not for a few days. I have some business that will keep me in the town."

"That's all right," said she at once, "for you can neglect your business, and come and help me to show Alison some of the places about. Hugh won't be bothered with us girls, so we shall have to depend on you."

"I'm sure I shall be delighted," said the young man; and then he bade them a general farewell again, and went out into the night—which was all throbbing with stars, above the black shadows of the hills.

CHAPTER III.

IN A CALDRON OF THE HILLS.

ALISON did not sleep much that night ; she lay awake thinking of these kind people among whom she had come, of their frank and pleasant ways, their good-natured banter of each other, their affection, and their obvious desire that she should feel herself at home among them. And as for the only one of them who was a stranger to her—Captain Macdonell—she was resolved to place herself on very friendly terms with him, if he also was willing. From the “Ludovick” and “Flora” of their mode of address, and from his general footing in the house, it was clear to her

that Captain Macdonell was her cousin's accepted lover ; so that she—that is, Alison—could extend towards him a kind of sisterly familiarity without fear ; and, besides, Flora would be pleased to find that her choice was thought much of and approved. That was one point. Then again she bethought her as to how she could manage to convince her aunt that it was not any hope of inheriting money that had brought her away from Kirk o' Shields, or induced her to obey similar previous summonses. That she was to inherit Aunt Gilchrist's money was quite freely spoken of, by the old lady among the rest ; and indeed Alison was not thinking much of herself in the matter ; she was mostly anxious that none of them should imagine that her father had any mercenary end in view in consenting to these visits. But how was she to show her own independence, or his indifference ? If Aunt Gil-

christ had been a purse-proud, overbearing woman, Alison could have faced her in battle-royal, and cut and slashed in scorn, and gone proudly home. But to face Aunt Gilchrist! She was the most whimsical of odd little tyrants. When she lashed, it was with a laugh. Her deadliest quarrels—with her brother—had only the tormenting of him for their aim. And as regards Alison herself, her treatment of “the bit lady” (except for an occasional snap when a sharper twinge than usual shot through her ankles) was just goodness itself. No, she could find no pretext for fighting Aunt Gilchrist; but the reflection was not a painful one; and it was with a pleased and dazed sense that under this roof there reigned a great good-will and content, and mutual and general kindness, that at last she fell asleep.

In her dreams she was back again in

Kirk o' Shields. It seemed to her that she was lying awake in her own small room. Black night was all around, save for the lurid flames that shot up into the startled sky. She hardly dared stir or breathe, for might not her sister be listening for that strange visitant—the pale mother—who would come and stand by the bedside—smiling and benignant—seen and yet unsubstantial, heard and yet voiceless and noiseless? Was that a moan or wail coming from the room close by in which the servants slept? and was the poor creature Margaret, unable to close her eyes, torturing herself with thoughts of her eternal doom? This seemed to be a terrible night, so long, so sombre, so hopeless. For what was there to look forward to? The morning would but bring her the sight of a thousand chimneys vomiting smoke and fire into the surcharged and heavy air; bedraggled women, tired of

face, and with shawls sheltering their head from the rain, would be trudging silent to their work ; poor little brats, barefooted, would be making their way along the miry streets to school. Then all day long the clash and din and thud of engines ; the air becoming thicker and thicker with poisonous fumes ; the dusk coming on prematurely, and the flames of the furnaces showing redder and redder through the gathering darkness. Is it time for the books now ? It is enough to make one's heart bleed to hear this poor woman praising the Lord for all His goodness to her, and to know that she is looking forward to an eternity of punishment. But soon she will have retired for the night ; and may a merciful Heaven grant her some brief spell of forgetfulness—this poor Margaret, with the saddened eyes ! Or is it only His beloved to whom He giveth sleep ? For those others—the hapless lost ones—for

them the worm that dieth not, and the fire that shall not be quenched.

Alison awoke with a cry. But what was this? Black night was no longer around her, with lowering skies and lurid flames; Kirk o' Shields had vanished; the solitary window of this neat, small room had grown to be of a beautiful, pale, bluish-gray. The dawn had come, silent and mystical. A flood of joy and peace and gratitude filled her heart; the day before her had no further dread for her; the fair world would once more be shining all around her, a gladness and a wonder to her eyes. Nay, even now, before any in the house were up, might she not make assurance doubly sure that all these visions and terrors were fled, and the new, calm day arrived, with its beneficent beauty and stillness? She stealthily rose, and got hold of a light travelling cloak, which she flung round her shoulders; then she went

to the window and removed the small muslin sash, and drew a chair into the embrasure, and sat down there. She seemed to hold her breath as she looked forth. The night was gone, but the day was not yet here ; all things looked ghostly and pale and strange ; the motionless waters of the lake, the wooded hills, the wan heavens themselves were as if they slept—as if they had slept, even as they were now, since creation's morn. Nothing stirred ; there was not a sound. On the calm bosom of the water the dark-green fir-woods of the opposite shore and the pale lilac heights above them were faithfully reflected—except where some long and shallow banks showed in orange seaweed above the surface. A small scarlet object far away floated double on this liquid plain ; she guessed that it might be a buoy to mark the steamers' course. A faint mist that hung about the woods

appeared to be lessening—that was the only sign of change, and of the slow progress of the hours.

But as she sat there alone, and more than content, a transformation was taking place that at first she did not perceive. There was no archangel's trump to declare the daybreak ; it came all so silently ; the hill-tops had been touched by the rosy light ere she was aware. And then she looked up. Above the dark-green woods, above the purple slopes and shoulders, the far-receding summits were bathed in a faint ethereal crimson, and the heavens overhead were of gold. The whole world seemed to grow warmer. There were intermingling colours on the wide waters of the lake. What was this sudden cry, too, startling the silence ? A sea-swallow had struck down upon that glassy plain, emerging with its prey in its beak ; its companions came screaming and dipping

and flashing around it. The new day broadened and descended from the hills ; the sunlight fell upon the fir-woods opposite ; far away in the north a small red object, leaving a brown trail behind it, began to move slowly along : was that the great steamer, with its scarlet funnels, coming south ? She heard sounds below ; the household was stirring. And then she stole quickly back to bed again, lest her cousin Flora should come to seek her ; but her closed eyes still beheld the beauty and the majesty and the wistfulness of that silent dawn, that seemed to have belonged to herself alone.

And it was Flora, as it chanced, who first came to call her ; the young lady appearing at the door of the room with a telegram in her hand.

“Look at this now, Alison ; was there ever anything so unfortunate !” said she (and it was only when she was excited or

unusually emphatic that a trace of Highland accent was heard in her speech : she said, " Was there effer anything so un-fhortunate ! ").

Then it turned out that certain friends from the south had telegraphed that they would reach Ballachulish that afternoon, on their way to Tyndrum next day ; and that they hoped Flora and Hugh would come down and spend the evening with them. They were almost bound to go, Flora explained ; but how could she leave her cousin just as she had arrived ? Alison assured her that she need have no scruple. What was a single day ? Besides, it was her—Alison's—place to remain with her aunt, and try to amuse her a little ; she would have plenty of occupation till the two cousins returned from Ballachulish.

But Aunt Gilchrist was of a different mind, when, the brother and sister being ready to start for the steamer, Alison pro-

posed to remain in the house and help her aunt with her sewing, or read to her, or otherwise wait on her.

“Read to me!” exclaimed the old lady, who had been peevishly grumbling all through breakfast-time. “Do ye want your head snapped off? If they fools o’ doctors cannot get this wretched thing out o’ my old bones—or nerves, or muscles, or whatever it is—why should you suffer, you stupid creature? Do ye want to be torn in bits?”

“I’m not afraid, Aunt Gilchrist,” said Alison, with a smile—and when she smiled she showed she had exceedingly pretty teeth, as Flora noticed.

“Go away!” continued the old lady, with a sour face. “Go down to the quay with Hugh and Flora, and see them leave; then be off by yourself, and keep out o’ my reach till the afternoon: I’ve not taken a drop o’ their poisonous iodides this morn-

ing, so I may be better by then, and we'll go for a drive. Now be off with ye, and not another word."

Alison did as she was bid ; and having seen her cousins leave by the steamer, she returned to the main street of the little town, and idly passed along that, looking at the small shop-windows and their modest displays. She had no definite idea of where she was going, but she naturally followed the route with which she was already familiar. She passed the fort. She left the last of the villas behind, and went away along the dusty road until she reached the banks of the river Nevis ; and here she lingered and loitered from time to time as an opening among the thick foliage of overhanging ash and alder and sycamore enabled her to look down into the clear-running stream. It was with an inexpressible wonder and delight that she regarded the loveliness of these banks,

and listened to the soft, continuous murmur of the river. The only waters she knew in Kirk o' Shields were, first of all, the canal—which seemed merely an intensification of all the surrounding squalor; and, secondly, a little burn which ran through a deep chasm some five or six miles away: the chasm itself was picturesque enough, but all its foliage was blighted and blackened, and the sluggish burn at the foot was of the colour of mud as it wound its way out into the grimy and melancholy fields. But look at this stream here—where the sunlight found an opening through the trees, and flashed a million diamonds upon the laughing ripples. The water was of the clearest golden-brown; she could see the colour of every red and olive-green pebble at the bottom. The overhanging branches, too, that trembled in the warm sunlight were of a bright and beautiful, sometimes of a translucent, green. And

this pleasant, murmuring music had no kind of sadness in it; it was cheerful—as the sunlight, and the fresh colours, and the sweet air all around her were: she wished that Agnes [were here, if only for one brief minute, to see and to hear.

She was wandering along idly enough, at peace with all the world, and well content with the solitariness, and the sunlight, and the placid murmur of the river, when she became aware that some one was behind her and overtaking her.

“Good morning, Miss Blair!”

She recognized the voice at once, and she turned forthwith to give Captain Macdonell a friendly welcome. She was not in the least confused. He was a companionable kind of person—simple, off-hand, good-natured in his manner, and there was a bright confidence in his look that commended him; besides, for Flora’s

sake, she wanted to be specially kind to Captain Ludovick.

"I saw you from the window of my hotel," he said without more ado; "and as soon as I could get rid of the man with whom I was engaged I followed you. Do you want a guide? Are you going up the Ben? I heard that Flora and Hugh had gone South, and I was coming along to offer my services, if I had not seen you go by."

She told him she had no idea of going up Ben Nevis; she had only come out for a bit of a stroll.

"Yes, of course," said he. "You mustn't attempt Ben Nevis until you get a little used to hill climbing. I'll tell you what we'll do; we'll get a couple of ponies some evening, if this fine weather lasts, and you and Flora will ride to the top, and Hugh and I will go with you, and Johnny to bring the ponies down. Then you'll stay

the night at the little wooden caravanserai, to get up in the morning to see the sun rise out of the German Ocean. How will that do?"

"I never was on horseback in my life," said she, somewhat aghast.

"Oh, but that's all right," said he. "You'll hold on; you've merely to lean well forward at the steep places. Well, now, where are you going at present? Would you like to try a bit of the hill by way of experiment? Suppose we go along, and I will show you the old track for ascending the hill before they cut the pony-track."

So these two went on together, she accepting his escort quite naturally; and she was resolved on the first opportunity to say something very pretty about Flora, so as to please him. But she did not get the chance—at least, not then. He was in a very gay and talkative mood, and was

doing his best to interest and amuse her, and to instruct her too.

“Oh yes,” he was saying, in answer to some chance remark of hers, “all this is very pretty—very beautiful, if you like. But it isn’t Lochaber at all. Lochaber is wild. These hills just now are like the hills you see from the Nile—pale chromolithographs; that isn’t Lochaber. You want to see this neighbourhood after a couple of days of Atlantic squalls—with heavy purple clouds and brilliant lights flashing about. You should get Hugh to talk to you about that——”

She glanced up with a little surprise.

“Ah, you don’t know Hugh yet, I should imagine,” said he. “He is a little shy. But he is a very extraordinary lad; he has all the Celtic sensitiveness to what is fine in music and painting and poetry; he seems to know by instinct what is right; and Flora has a good deal of the

same quality too. It isn't that they themselves try to do much ; but their appreciation of what is most beautiful, of what is best in all the arts, seems to be so marvellous ; it seems to be some kind of sixth sense ; I don't understand it myself, but I can see how true and fine their judgment is——”

“But you are Highland too, are you not ?” Alison said gently.

“Oh, I am a duffer,” said he quite simply, as they walked along ; “and it's a good, wholesome thing, when you are a duffer, to know it. But that fellow Hugh—why, he does all sorts of things by a kind of instinct. You wouldn't think he was a bundle of nerves, would you ?—he's as strong as a young colt. But if you're driving with him, he's the first to tell if anything goes wrong with the springs, and he's the first to notice if the horse goes a bit lame. I declare to you he can sail a

boat better than I can, and I've been at it all my life, and he has spent half his time in Edinburgh at his classes. It's some nicety of touch he's got—all the way round; you should see him throw a cast of trout-flies on to smooth water, or screw a ball over a tennis-net. And his sister has a great deal of the same faculty, though of course she has not tried her hand at so many different things. You wouldn't think she was very sensitive to impressions, would you? You might even," he added, rather turning to his companion and regarding her—"you might even say she was a trifle careless—and—and robust—even mannish—in her ways?"

"But surely," said Alison, with the blood mantling in her cheeks (for now was her chance)—"surely that very frankness comes from her honesty, and her good-nature, and her kind intention towards you? Surely that is so!"

“Yes, I think it is,” he said, but not so warmly as Alison could have wished; “I think she always means well, and knows it, and is not very particular about people’s opinion of her. However, she seems to have quite the same instinctive appreciation that he has of what is fine in music, or in poetry, or in the colour of a bit of silk, for the matter of that. Neither the one nor the other professes to sing, you know; you couldn’t persuade them to try a song indoors, before strangers at least; but if you are out in a boat with them in the evening, and one or the other begins with some of the old Gaelic airs, then you never heard two voices in your life that went together with such a singular harmony. There is no effort; they don’t seem to care; sometimes he sings second to her, sometimes she sings second to him; and it is a fragmentary kind of thing—a line of a verse, or merely the humming

of the tune. Sometimes I think he should have been trained as a musician."

"And yet he is going to be an architect?" said she.

He noticed the touch of surprise, perhaps of disappointment, in her tone.

"Oh, but you must get Hugh in a confidential mood, and then he will show to you that architecture is the noblest of all the arts; and not only so, but that it combines all the others. However, it isn't to everybody he confides his ambitions. For my part, I believe there are the makings of a very great man in that lad, though he is just now entirely occupied in building a jib and mainsail sailing-boat. Yes; I'm looking forward to the time when I shall be a broken-down old Highland laird, with a snuff-box and an old collie as my chief companions, and Hugh Munro will be away in the South, one of the great men of the world, building monuments that will

preserve his name for centuries. You don't see much in Hugh, perhaps?—he's shy; but I know I am right."

By this time they were crossing a wide stretch of undulating moorland, by a path marked here and there by a bit of smooth-worn rock, and here and there by a few scattered stones among the tufts of coarse grass and heather. Far above them towered the mighty bulk of the Ben—what they could see of it, that is—the massive shoulders seamed with deep scars, the lilac-gray rocks wet in places and glittering in the sun. He was walking at a studiously moderate pace, to encourage her; every now and again he would stop for half a second, that they might go on together.

"You must tell me," said he, "not when you are tired, but when you think you are beginning to be tired—then we will turn."

"But I am a very good walker," she

made answer. "At Kirk o' Shields, if you want to see a few green leaves and bushes—and they are not very green, poor things—or if you want to hunt for a primrose in the spring-time, you've got to walk away out to Kirtle Burn, nearly six miles off. That is a good walk, there and back."

"You ought to drive there and back, and have all your time at the place: wouldn't that be more sensible?" he suggested.

"At Kirk o' Shields no one ever drives, except to a funeral," said Alison quite simply, and without being in the least aware of the grimness of her answer.

They were now ascending the lower slopes of the mountain, and she was doing excellently well under his careful encouragement and supervision.

"I shouldn't wonder if we got as far as the tarn," said he cheerfully, "and I

should consider that a very creditable performance for a first attempt."

"If I can get up so far," said she, laughing, but pausing to take breath all the same, "that will be all right; for we're bound to get down somehow."

"Well, you've done enough for the present; you must rest for a few minutes now," said he; and he chose out a dry hillock where she could have a comfortable seat.

He sat down beside her. They were now at a considerable height, and there was a spacious view before them, across the wide, undulating country to the long ranges of hills in the north. And truly there was not much of wild Lochaber about the still, beautiful, soft-tinted picture: those far hills of faint rose-purple were about as pale in hue and as ethereal as the sky immediately over their summits.

"I hope you will get a day like this,"

said he, "if your Aunt Gilchrist should think of driving you over to Oyre."

"To——"

"To Oyre—that is my father's place," he explained. "And I hope you will pay us a little visit. I should like you to see my father; why, you cannot go away from the Highlands without having seen the last of the old Highland gentlemen."

She looked up, a little astonished, and he smiled.

"That is what Hugh and Flora call him; but I think it would be better to say the last of the old-fashioned Highland gentlemen. Yes, he is of the old school entirely; and so is the house, and so are all his belongings. He won't part with anybody who has been years in his service; no, nor with any horse or dog that has done good work for him: it's a rare hospital for incurables that we have at Oyre. And, as you may imagine, the old

gentleman is greatly given to praising past times, and magnifying the joy that used to exist then. You see, he remembers the *Ceilidh*. The *Ceilidh*," he continued—and he was carelessly pulling a twig of heather now and again, and she was contentedly listening, for his voice was pleasant to hear, and that was a beautiful, distant panorama spread out all before her, and the very solitude was a grateful kind of thing—"well, that is only the Gaelic word for a visit; but it used to be the custom for the young girls of a village to meet at a particular house in the evening, and take their work with them, and then the young men would come in, naturally, and there would be songs and stories, and often a little dancing, to the sound of the pipes. It was all very harmless and innocent; and if a young man could compose a good song about his sweetheart, there was his chance; and if one could play the pipes

well, or tell a thrilling ghost story, there was the chance too. But nowadays, where is all that gone? My father will tell you that it is the Free Church that has taken the heart and soul out of the life of the Highlanders."

She started as he spoke, but he did not notice.

"No more music, no more singing, no more dancing, no rational enjoyment whatever—that's the programme," he went on, all unwittingly. "If a visit is paid to any one in the village, it is to talk about saving grace and the carnality of works—that's the *Ccilidh* nowadays! Why, some of the militia lads, who come over from the outlying islands, are just like to go mad when they hear the pipes. The pipes are forbidden in nearly all the islands now: the Free Kirk ministers will have nothing more wildly hilarious than the Jew's-harp, if the young folks must have

music. Really one loses patience to see a simple and generous and naturally light-hearted people tyrannized over by a set of men who are ignorant, ill-educated, narrow-minded, without any knowledge of the world whatever, and with no more understanding of human nature than a cow has of algebra——”

But here he laughed at his own vehemence.

“You will think I have put on my father’s mantle,” said he; “and yet I confess it does make me feel a little wild to see one of those illiterate, ill-conditioned boors become the spiritual master of a whole community of Highlanders—who are at heart gentlemen. Sometimes,” he continued (and he was far too much engaged with those twigs of heather to notice the expression of his companion’s face), “I am extremely happy to say, one of them gets hoist with his own petard. I

know of a parish where the crofters were not so badly off, as things go ; but this fellow came among them, sowing ill-will, talking about tyranny and slavery and all the rest ; and at last he got what he wanted—they chose him to be their minister ; and there he was installed as the champion of the rights of the people. But his popularity did not last very long. He was so inconsistent as to complain to the policeman that somebody had stolen his gooseberries, and also that some other person had actually opened his gate and driven a cart across his field by way of a short cut ; whereupon he was immediately and angrily denounced by his congregation as an aristocrat, a land-owner, and an enemy of the poor ; and when the Sustentation Fund collectors went round, they came back with empty books—nobody would subscribe a blessed farthing. Oh yes, they're a set of nice, pleasant, peace-

making, considerate, gentlemanly fellows, those Free Kirk ministers!" said this young man. "I suppose your father doesn't come much in contact with them, Miss Blair? He is a clergyman, is he not?"

"My father is a Free Church minister," Alison said quietly.

Then young Macdonell leaped to his feet as though he had been shot through the heart; and his handsome face, that ordinarily shone with a sunny good-humour and gaiety, was hot and red with bitter mortification.

"It's true what they say," he exclaimed, as if he were gnashing the words between his teeth, "that the sons of the Highlanders are not as their fathers were. My father would have made no such mistake. He would have found out before uttering a word. Miss Blair, how am I to ask your pardon?"

His distress—his humiliation—his abject self-abasement—was quite painful to witness; and Alison, looking up for a moment with her honest, clear gray eyes, was all anxiety to say a few reassuring words to him.

“But why should you think you have offended me?” she asked, in her gentle way—and she was looking down again now. “I don’t know anything about the Free Church ministers in the Highlands. Perhaps what you say of them is true; and if it is true, why should it not be said and known?”

“But I had no idea your father was a Free Church minister!” he exclaimed.

“Of course I knew that,” said she, in the most friendly fashion possible. “And I am sure of this too, that if you knew my father you would not include him among the stirrers-up of ill-will and dissension. He is strict in his ideas of what the con-

duct of a professed Christian should be ; yes, and a little old-fashioned, too, perhaps, about many observances ; but I think if you knew him you would respect and honour him for the very way in which he clings to the customs of his forefathers. I suppose you never heard of the Blairs of Moss-end ? ”

She looked up with a quiet smile.

“ N—no, I’m afraid not,” he admitted.

“ Nor of Adam Blair, the famous Seceder ? ” she continued ; and there was some amusement in her eyes as she thus proclaimed her pride of ancestry. “ I suppose not. But our family are descendants of his ; and, of course, *noblesse oblige* : we have to maintain our own principles and practice, whatever our neighbours may do.”

Indeed she was obviously bent on removing the chagrin that was still visible in the young man’s face ; and when they

again set forth to breast the steep incline, she proceeded to tell him some stories of those Blairs of former days, which seemed to suggest that, however austere in piety they may have been, they could also exhibit a grim sort of humour on occasion. But the memory of his grievous blunder was not yet gone from him. He was rather silent. She had to do nearly the whole of the talking—which was grossly unfair, for she needed all the breath she could get for her climbing; while he stepped from tuft to tuft, or from stone to stone, with the greatest possible ease. When she subsequently asked Hugh Munro what would have happened if her walking powers had given out, and she had had to succumb, he said—

“What—and Ludovick with you! Did you ever look at his shoulders? Did you ever see him catch hold of an anchor-chain, and give a haul with those arms of his?

He could have carried you all the way up, and carried you all the way down, and thought nothing at all about it ! ”

At length, after what seemed to her a good deal of laborious work—although he lent her a helping hand whenever there was any excuse for doing so—they reached the level and marshy plateau in which lies the solitary little lake already referred to ; and then he asked her whether she thought she could hold out if they crossed the mountain and struck down the other side, getting home by Glen Nevis.

“ Couldn’t we get to the top first ? ” said she boldly, glancing up to the far-receding heights overhead.

He laughed, but he seemed to approve her courage all the same.

“ No, no,” said he ; “ you are not anywhere near the top yet ; and it becomes very steep after you leave the tarn. We shall do very well if we get back by Glen

Nevis. Besides," he added, looking all around, "there's something queer—don't you notice how dark it is getting?"

"Yes; it is dark," said she.

"There's something gathering overhead, though where it can have come from I can't imagine; there was not a cloud in the sky when we started. Well, let us get along."

So they set out once more—he usually taking the lead, especially in the marshy places, and finding for her a safe and solid track; and she watching where he put his foot, and sometimes taking his hand to help her in a bit of a jump. All this time, however, the mysterious darkness around them was increasing. The lonely tarn over there seemed almost black. There was a sultry feeling in the air, and a sensation as though one could hear a great distance, though the silence was absolute.

All of a sudden she was startled by a short, sharp crack behind her, as though a pistol had been fired close to the back of her head; and as she wheeled round in dismay—to find nothing before her but this intensifying gloom—she could hear a thunderous rumbling go rolling and reverberating through the unknown deeps of the air, and dying away in lessening and ever-lessening echoes.

“That was pretty close by, though I did not see the flash,” he said, with much composure. “We’d better push on quickly. If we can strike the path down to Glen Nevis before the rain begins, I know where there is a small wooden bridge where you will get shelter.”

He had hardly spoken when a blinding glare of light shone all around them—a glare that showed them nothing but itself, for it blotted out the whole of the world from their bewildered eyes. Then came a

startling rattle overhead—a quick succession of snaps and cracks, as if rocks were being rent and hurled against each other immediately above them ; it was not until these appalling explosions had ceased that the muffled echoes, repeated and repeated, boomed and rolled away through the awe-stricken silence. He regarded his companion. Her face was pale ; but not paler than usual, he thought. Nay, the instant she noticed that he was looking her way she brightened up.

“ Is this the wild Lochaber, then, that you wanted ? ”

“ A thunder-storm is a thunder-storm anywhere,” said he, “ and I wish it had not caught you so far from home.”

For the first heavy drops had begun to fall, and the darkness around them grew more intense. He stopped for a moment, and whipped off his jacket of rough homespun.

“ You must put this round your shoulders,” said he, approaching her.

“ Indeed I will not,” she said emphatically. “ Why should you get wet any more than I ? ”

“ But you will—you must. Now don’t argue like your Aunt Gilchrist and the Doctor, but be reasonable,” he said ; and he had never spoken to her like this before—exercising a kind of brotherly authority over her, as it were. Indeed he took possession of her. He slipped her arm into one of the sleeves, pulled on the coat, drew it round her, slipped in the other arm, and securely fastened the buttons in front, even to the upturned collar, which came round the lower part of her face. It was none too soon. The water was now coming down in sheets—a straight, resistless downpour, which seemed to spread a smoking vapour all around. He took her hand and led her onward, for the rain

drowned her eyes. She followed him blindly, not caring now whether she reached dry footing or not, so long as she could keep up with him.

Then something happened that caused them both to stand stock-still, as if they had been paralyzed. There was another wild glare all around them, but in the midst of it there was a ball of fire—a ball of white fire that appeared to be hurled down to the ground just in front of them—and instantly there was a sudden, terrific, ear-splitting rattle of sounds that seemed to shake the earth to its very foundations. Alison felt him let go her hand, and at the same moment perceived that he had dropped his stick on the heather, and was standing there uncertain. Then he began to press his arm, from the wrist up to the shoulder.

“What is it?” she cried in quick terror.

“ Only a bit of an electric shock ; there’s no harm done,” he said, as he picked up his stick again. “ I suppose this was the conductor—— ”

“ Then why not throw it away ? ” she said instantly.

“ I can’t do that,” he said ; “ my father gave it me more than a dozen years ago— on the day after I caught my first salmon. Come along ; we must get out of this hollow cup as soon as we can.”

So he caught hold of her hand again, and they set off. But the rain was now worse than ever, and seemed to press down the clouds and mist upon the ground so that she at least could make nothing of their whereabouts. He appeared to be leading her across a marshy and trackless and interminable waste, through white vapours surrounding them and shutting out all the rest of the universe. Fortunately they did not encounter any more fire-balls ;

their trouble now was merely those blinding sheets of water that seemed to cause the earth to smoke around them. As for their route, she was happily ignorant of any danger; she had never heard of people being lost on Ben Nevis; she took it for granted that her companion was familiar with every slope and corrie of these Lochaber hills, and trusted herself implicitly in his hands.

And yet she was glad enough to feel that they were at last beginning to descend from these solitary heights; and when eventually they struck a rude little path consisting of chipped rocks and stones, and when he told her that this would lead them down to Glen Nevis, it was pleasant to know that there was a link connecting them with the world far below. Moreover, the rain was lessening now; the clouds were lifting; a warm glow as of sunshine was appearing through the

“smurr;” finally a flood of golden light fell all around them, on the wet path, on the shining grass, on the silver-gray rocks. He took the soaking coat from off her shoulders and slung it over his arm. He was talking very cheerfully to her now, for this encounter with a thunder-storm in a caldron of the hills had driven his unhappy blunder of the morning out of his mind. And Miss Dimity Puritan was very cheerful too, smiling and showing the pretty dimple in her cheek; and declaring that her be-drenched and flaccid garments (which he studiously forbore from noticing) would be perfectly dry and comfortable long before they should get back to Fort William.

As they got farther and farther down into the lower world (and Alison found this descent over broken stones a far more trying operation than the previous climbing) the sunlight became hotter and hotter,

until she rather envied her companion the coolness of his flannel sleeves. And where was there any sign of the storm through which they had passed? When at length they were descending into the beautiful valley of Glen Nevis—a sunny flash here and there upward through the overhanging foliage told her where the river wound its way down to the sea—he suddenly asked her to pause and listen. What was this sound, as yet distant and faint? Why, surely there was a reaping-machine at work somewhere in those fertile fields in the hollow of the glen?

“They’ve had no rain at all down here,” said he.

“Then,” said she, demurely regarding her drooping skirts, “they’ll think I must have fallen into the river.”

However, she was not to challenge the curiosity of the Fort William folk in any such manner; for they were still outside

the town when a friend of Captain Macdonell's came driving by in a dog-cart, and he was delighted to have Miss Blair take the seat beside him, where the apron in front afforded her all the concealment she wanted. In this wise she was driven home, and immediately retired to her own room, thoroughly tired out and aching considerably about the ankles, and yet glad enough to have met with this adventure now that it was all over.

For she had seen a good deal to-day of this young man, who was naturally an object of great interest to her, as likely to become a relative of hers. And in thinking back over all the things that had turned up in their conversation, what struck her as most peculiar was that he had been far more ready to speak about Hugh than about Flora, and that he expressed a much more enthusiastic appreciation of the brother than of the sister.

Was it his modesty, then? She had always understood that a young man engaged to be married was for ever anxious to talk about his future bride, and to expatiate upon her various perfections and virtues and celestial attributes so long as there was left in the world one patient ear to listen. But perhaps (Alison finally said to herself) Captain Ludovick knew that Flora, who was an independent, proud-spirited, wilful kind of creature, would resent being made the subject of any such foolish and infatuated discourse; and perhaps it was really out of respect for her, and for her wishes, that he remained mostly silent.

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN.

NEXT morning, Aunt Gilchrist being still confined to her room by the super-sensitive-ness of her toes and fingers, and Hugh and Flora not having yet returned from the South, Alison was again left to her own resources ; and thus it was that she came to make the acquaintance of the boy John. The boy John, whose sole aim in life was to sneak out of the way and do absolutely nothing, was rather glad to have his idleness publicly recognized and condoned. He went about with Alison very willingly ; and as he immediately discovered that she knew next to nothing of

country life, he was soon engaged in imparting information to her about many other things besides the plants and flowers in the garden, of which he himself, by the way, was pretty ignorant. Alison listened in amazement, and with a little fear, to this lumbering lad, whose small, twinkling, shrewd eyes seemed to suggest that he was not quite such a fool as he looked. And yet she came to the conclusion that John's conception of the universe, and of his own position in it, was perfectly sincere. He appeared to take it for granted that all nature, animate and inanimate, was in a conspiracy to maim, injure, and destroy him, John ; and that he, John, was therefore justified in taking his revenge beforehand, whenever he got the chance. Of course there was more than that. Sometimes, instead of merely killing them, you could outwit those malevolent creatures by which you were surrounded. Ill-luck they meant

you; but good-luck you might extort from them by the exercise of a superior cunning. Here, for example, as Alison and he were strolling about the back garden, they came upon a big black snail that had strayed on to the foot-path.

“Now, mem, now uss your chance!” John whispered eagerly, and he put his hand on her arm. “Quick, now—the little duffle he does not see us—his horns are out—quick, now, mem, grip him up by the horns and throw him over your left shoulder—oh, that will bring you plenty of money and good-luck!—plenty, plenty!”

“I would not touch the horrid beast for anything!” she exclaimed, with a shiver of disgust.

Seeing that, Johnny advanced by himself, knelt down, extended his hand warily—warily—and then made a sudden grab. But the horns were instantly gone. He got up, sullen and scowling.

“The little duffle!” he grumbled. “He wass only pretending not to see us. If I could get a big stone now, I would bash his head for him!”

“You will do nothing of the kind!” said Alison angrily.

And then Johnny grinned. He did not look further for a stone; he stooped and picked up the snail in his hand, and crept across the garden to the wall. On the other side, tethered in a bit of pasture, was a large she-goat, with magnificent horns and beard; and when this heavy-shouldered, broad-faced, lubberly gnome had reached the wall, he raised his head to the top, peeped over, flung the snail with all his might at old Nanny, and then came crouching back to Alison.

“Mebbe she’ll eat the snail,” said he, in great glee, “and it will kill her. Cosh, that would be fine!”

“Why, what harm has the poor old creature done you?” Alison demanded.

He looked at her ; then he glanced at the stone wall, so as to make sure the old Nanny-goat should not overhear.

“Mebbe you’ll not know,” said he, pretending to whisper mysteriously, but his eyes were twinkling : she never knew but that he was making fun of her ignorance. “Do you not know where them beasts hef to go, once in effery year ? They hef to go to the big Duffle himself, to get their beards combed ; ay, that’s a truth, now ; effery year they hef to go, and the Duffle gets their beards combed for them. And who knows what they will bring back, and what they are thinking about, and what harm they can do to you, if you anger them ? There’s wild ones in Ardgour ; and no one will go near the rocks where they are after dark ; for they’ll come behind you, and push you, and push you, down into the sea. Ay, and it’s not any use firing at them either, even in the daytime ;

for the big Duffle he hass put something ofer them, and nothing will touch them. Cosh, I wonder if she hass eaten the snail !”

He was for sneaking back to the stone wall, but Alison impatiently called him away ; and so he came and humbly accompanied her as before, only pausing now and again, when he managed to discover some pugnacious insect that he could worry into a display of its fierceness.

But Alison must have produced a most favourable impression upon Johnny’s ingenuous mind, for it was entirely of his own accord that he asked her whether she would not go for a sail. Miss Flora and Mr. Hugh, he had heard, were coming back by the midday steamer ; would the young lady not like to go in the boat to meet them ? There was a nice breeze. Maybe they would get as far down as Corran ? And, if not, they would have a sail whatever.

Alison (who rather wondered that Captain Macdonell had not come along to say whether his arm had quite recovered from the electric shock of the previous day) at once assented; and Johnny led the way down to the shore, where he was not long in launching a small rowing-boat that was lying there. Moreover, the tide being a little way out, he generously offered, if she would but wait a minute or so, to hunt out two partans (by which he meant crabs), so that she might witness a combat between them; but she declined that amiable proposal; so he asked her to get into the stern of this rickety small craft, and he would pull her out to the sailing-boat, which was lying at her moorings. A few minutes thereafter Alison was on board, and securely seated in the little cockpit; while Johnny, forward on the deck, was hoisting the gaff of the main-sail with a vigour which showed that his constitutional

aversion from work was not due to any want of muscle.

Now Alison was absolutely ignorant of everything connected with boats and sailing; while Johnny, on the other hand, took it for granted that she knew as much as any of the young people about, any one of whom, in going out for a sail, would naturally take the tiller, while he, Johnny, looked after the jib-sheets. Accordingly, when he had fastened the small boat to the moorings, and was ready to let the larger one go, he turned to see if she was ready. She was quietly regarding him.

"Will ye tek the tiller, mem?" he suggested.

"Oh yes," said she, with cheerful alacrity, "if you will show me what to do."

"Oh, well," said he, not at all suspecting her real ignorance, "I would keep her pretty close up: there's sometimes bad squahls on this loch."

Forthwith he let slip the moorings ; then he turned round to see what his fellow-voyager was doing. She was doing nothing. The main-sail was flapping and rattling in the wind, and the young lady was merely concerned in ducking her head under the swaying boom. Did she not understand, then, that the moorings had been cast off ? He went down beside her, put the helm up a bit, slacked out the main-sheet, gave it one hitch round the pin, and handed it to her ; then he surrendered the tiller.

“ Ay, just keep her about that,” said he ; and then he went and stood on the deck by the side of the mast, which was his accustomed place when either Miss Flora or Mr. Hugh was sailing the boat.

And at first things went very well indeed ; and no doubt Johnny was assured that the young lady could sail a boat just like any one else—probably better than himself, for he was not much of a hand at it. The

brisk breeze that was blowing came almost straight up the loch; they had a long stretch before having to go about; and it was with great surprise and delight that Alison found this bounding and living thing so completely under her control, obeying the smallest touch of the rudder, and yet ever cleaving an onward way and throwing sparkling white foam from the rising and dipping bows. She was not in the least afraid; she suspected no danger; she was exultant, rather, with this new-found joy of speeding through a world of dazzling sea and sunlight, herself the mistress of the mysterious power that was bearing her so swiftly along. She was more excited than she knew. When the wind struck down in a heavier gust than usual, the sudden "swish" of water all along the side of the boat was like music in her ears. And Master Johnny no doubt considered that they were doing splendidly,

and making a very brave display, if anybody happened to be watching them from the distant shore.

But Master Johnny's serene confidence in his companion's seamanship was destined to be rudely shaken when it was time to go about.

"You may put her round now," said he, from his post by the mast.

"Yes?" said Alison inquiringly.

"Ay, you may put her about now," Johnny repeated.

"But what am I to do?" she called to him.

He turned and stared.

"Put the helm down," said he; "we'll go about now."

And still she sat helpless, awaiting instructions, so that even Johnny must at last have perceived her appalling ignorance.

"Put the tiller aweh from you!" he called to her.

Poor Alison was all bewildered. She vaguely knew that something had gone wrong—that something was happening—and then that Johnny was down here in the cockpit, working quickly at the ropes—that the boom was over on the other side, and she holding the tiller with her other hand—and that presently they were sailing along, apparently with as much ease and comfort as before. As for Johnny, he could now make fast his lee jib-sheet; but it had been forcibly impressed on his youthful mind that his sole companion for the time being knew as much about sailing as he did of Greek.

And perhaps it was this discovery, coupled with the knowledge that he himself was but an indifferent hand, and was never allowed to go out in this boat unless there was some capable person on board, that served to unnerve him, just when coolness and self-command were most

necessary. For the wind had freshened up considerably ; and when they got farther and farther out into the middle of the loch it began to come along in swirling gusts that were extremely disconcerting. There was no plain sailing, no exultant joy, for Alison now. She could only sit clinging to the main-sheet, and watching the motion of Johnny's hand as he directed her how to keep the tiller : the fact being that, although by this time he was quite aware of her absolute ignorance, he preferred not to take over the responsibility on to his own shoulders. And as his chief notion of safety, when those gusts came along, was to keep the boat close up, under Alison's inexperienced guidance she was continually staggering into the wind, and then being blown down on the other side, with a terrific rattle of the loose oars and spars on deck. He was in the cockpit by this time, attending to the main-sheet

as occasion demanded ; but he would not touch the tiller ; that was the young lady's lookout : the truth is, he had lost his head altogether, and could only mutter to himself again and again, " That duffle of a wind ! " He scowled as he looked down the loch. His malignant enemy was too strong for him ; he could but bear those furious buffets, and wonder when they would cease. And sometimes he would try to escape. Taking advantage of a lull, he would let her head away a little ; the shivering sails would instantly fill, and she would shoot forward willingly enough ; then would come another tearing squall, driving the gunwale down into the seething water, and threatening to send the small craft and all its contents to the bottom. He had forgotten about the shore now, and about possible spectators. He was at the mercy of this wind-demon that struck and struck and was trying to send them

over ; and he could not strike in return, nor yet run away and hide : his enemy was his master now, and he was helpless.

He happened to look back, and towards the land.

“ There’s a boat coming out—is she mekking for us, do you think ? ” he said.

But how could Alison tell ? Besides, she was too much engaged in clinging to her place, and also in doing what she could to prevent the wind from getting a grip of the flapping and cracking sails. But John kept his eye upon that small cockle-shell in the distance ; and at last he said, with an awe-stricken air—

“ Cosh, it’s Macdonell himself ; and he’ll be for giffing me an ahfu’ licking ! ”

Alison turned quickly. She could see the small boat and its tiny white sail, and also a figure seated in the stern, but she could not make out who he was.

“ Is that Captain Macdonell’s boat,

John?" she asked of him, amid this bewildering din of tumbling oars, and swinging spars, and creaking cordage.

"Tuz," said Johnny, in gloomy assent. And then he added (still bent on keeping her responsible), "Will I tek down the main-sail now, and wait for him?"

"I don't know; how should I know?" said Alison, who was rather bewildered. "Wait for him, did you say? Oh yes, certainly! If that is Captain Macdonell, certainly wait for him!"

"I'll tek down the main-sail whatever," said Johnny; and he went forward and loosed the halyards, and rattled down the main-sail and gaff upon the deck.

That small blue boat, with the tiny white lug-sail, was coming along in beautiful fashion, seeming to skim the crests of the waves like a sea-gull; and long before he was near, Alison had recognized—and recognized with heartfelt gratitude, and with

a curious sense of trustfulness and security—that it was Ludovick Macdonell who was the solitary figure there. When he ran the little craft alongside he got to his feet, threw a line to Johnny, brailed up the sail, and leaped on board.

“Good morning, Miss Blair,” said he very coolly. “I saw you were in a fix, and I thought I’d run out and lend you a hand. And you,” he said, turning to the cowering Johnny, who regarded him with a furtive eye—“you’ve been making a nice exhibition of yourself, young shaver! What were you doing? Did you want to send the boat to the bottom?”

“The wind was blowing so hard,” said Johnny sulkily; he guessed that the belabouring of his shoulders was but a question of a couple of minutes.

“Why didn’t you take in a couple of reefs, then?” said Macdonell, who was getting his own small boat fastened securely astern.

“ I could not reef the sail ahl by myself in them squahls,” answered the youthful mariner, still plunged in apprehensive gloom.

“ Then what prevented your hauling up the tack, and running away back to the quay ? ”

“ She wanted to go on,” said Johnny, at a venture ; and “ she,” being thus in a measure appealed to, thought she ought to interfere.

“ Indeed the whole fault is mine, Captain Macdonell,” Alison said. “ I have no doubt Johnny imagined I could help in sailing the boat—and I don’t know anything about it—and since it came on to blow so hard I am sure he has done everything he could think of.”

“ But what brought you out here ? Where were you going ? ” he asked in amazement.

“ We thought we might go down and

meet Flora and Hugh," she said. "But it was only a fancy. Shall we go back? Is there any danger?"

"I will take very good care there won't be any danger now," he made answer, confidently enough; "but once or twice I thought you were over—I did, indeed. It was two men on the shore who happened to catch sight of you; and when they called to me, and I saw the trouble you were in, I bolted through the town, and put out in the little *Blue-Bell*—none too soon, as I think. Here, Johnny, you young idiot, come along and get this sail reefed."

Johnny, observing with his shrewd, small eyes that the captain appeared to be in a very good humour, grew less apprehensive about his shoulders, and set to work with a quite unusual alacrity, in hopes of procuring a remission of his self-imposed sentence. Instead of looking about for a

stick or a rope's-end, Captain Macdonell was laughing and joking with the young lady the while he was getting the boat into proper trim ; and at last, when everything was right, he insisted on her resuming possession of the tiller and the main-sheet.

“ That's the thing ! ” he said to her, as the boat shot forward through these rushing seas. “ Don't be afraid—keep her full—let her have it—never mind the gusts—that's the way now ! ”

This was all very well ; but the small craft, reefed and all as she was, was now tearing along at a spanking pace ; and Alison could not help regarding with apprehension the surging and hissing water that came so close up to the rail.

“ Please, I wish you would take these things ! ” she said.

“ Certainly, if you prefer it,” he answered at once ; and she made room for him, so

that he could sit with his left arm on the tiller and his right hand holding the sheet.

“ Ah, that is so much more pleasant ! ” said she, with a smile. “ I feel safe now ; and—and I can thank you for having come out to our rescue ; for we were in danger, were we not ? ”

He hesitated ; then he laughed.

“ I should like to think I had saved you from a watery grave. And I should like you to think it too. But I am afraid I must tell the truth. Of course, when you kept staggering into the wind like that, with every inch of canvas up, a particularly bad squall might have sent you over ; but as soon as Johnny had lowered the sail you were safe enough ; you would merely have drifted away up north again—with the chance of being run down by a steamer if you didn't get in before nightfall. But the two men who drew my attention to you fancied you were in a parlous case ;

and I can tell you John Gilpin didn't whisk through Edmonton half as fast as I got down through Fort William to the quay. But if you want to be very much indebted to me," he continued, in his usual frank and good-humoured way, "you may take into consideration that I had no time to reef the sail of the *Blue-Bell* when I set out; I had the sheet once round my wrist, and took my chance of the puffs."

"I am sure I would much rather believe that you rescued us from very serious danger," said Alison, with a pleasant smile.

"This I am going to do for you at any rate," said he—"I am going to show you something of the management of a boat, so that you yourself may know what to do if you should get into a difficulty again. And I don't think there is any use in our trying to get down to Corran—beating against a wind like this—before the steamer comes up from Ballachulish. We

should not be in time. What do you say—shall we run away up to the head of the loch and get into more sheltered water, and I will give you your first lessons in sailing?”

“Very well,” said she. “You have saved our lives; you can do what you like with us.”

Accordingly Johnny was ordered to haul up the main-tack; the steersman rounded the boat away from the wind, and slacked out the main-sheet; and presently they were spinning along before the brisk breeze, with the water apparently grown quite smooth around them. John, foreseeing a long spell of idleness, proceeded to make himself comfortable. He stretched himself flat on the deck, face downward, put his elbows out at right angles, and rested his chin on his clasped hands. But he did not try to sleep; on the contrary, his small, twinkling eyes were shrewdly

observant ; and as all fear of a thrashing was now gone from his mind, he was in a humorous, cheerful, and communicative mood. He did not exactly join in the conversation between Captain Macdonell and Miss Blair ; but from time to time he made remarks—which might be listened to or not listened to. After all, he was in a position of some importance. He was the custodian of the boat. He was giving them this sail. Besides, his observations were addressed to the sea, and the sky, and the air ; no one was obliged to listen ; but the shrewd, twinkling eyes knew pretty well when he had been overheard.

A large steam-yacht passed them, making for the north.

“ Cosh, I would like fine to see her run into a steamer ! ” said this merry lad (talking to his two hands). “ She would chump and chump in the watter before she went down head-first ! ”

A black-backed gull flew past overhead.

"If I had a herring now," Johnny was heard to mutter, "I would put a hook in it, and float it out with a piece of string; and ferry soon you'd see him come back and dive for the herring. Ay, and when he found the hook in his throat, wouldn't he think he had caught hold of the Duffle!"

There was a small cottage perched up on the wooded heights they were passing—on a plateau, with a bit of clearance around it: a solitary croft, perhaps, removed far above the world, or perhaps a shelter for some keeper or watcher belonging to Conaglen Forest.

"What a lonely place that must be to live in!" Alison said to her companion.

And Johnny must needs raise his eyes too. He regarded that isolated cottage for some time.

"I'm thinking that wass the last place

that God made," he observed to himself, laying his chin once more on the cushion of his two hands—"ay, the last place that God made, when He wass going aweh hom tired on the Saturday night."

"Johnny," Macdonell said sharply, "get up and put those oars and boat-hooks properly together. And slack out the lee jib-sheet a bit more. What's the use o' your lying sprawling on the deck there, like a dead porpoise?"

Thus admonished, Johnny got up and began, in a lazy and leisurely fashion, to put things ship-shape; but he was grinning a little; perhaps the dark cogitations of his own brain were affording him amusement.

They ran away up to the entrance of upper Loch Eil, where they got into more sheltered water; and here, the reefs being shaken out, Alison received her first lessons in the art of sailing a small cutter. It was

an interesting, even an absorbing, task ; and the first intimation they got that Flora and Hugh must have returned to Fort William was the passing by of the great scarlet-funnelled steamer on her way to Corpach. But still they continued at their manœuvres and evolutions ; for Alison was eager to learn ; and Captain Macdonell was grown rather proud of his pupil ; while to the boy John was administered as sound and wholesome a dose of work as he had encountered for many a long day. They hardly noticed how the time passed. As the mellow afternoon went by the wind moderated considerably ; so that they could run out into the open loch when they chose, with no thought of reefing. Alison admitted that she was rather hungry ; but she was not going to give up for that reason. Moreover, when he at length overcame her persistency, and got her consent to make for home, it was found

that far more time than they had expected was consumed in getting back, in securing the boat at her moorings, and so forth; and when at last they reached the house, Alison discovered that there was not much more than half an hour left for her in which to write a letter to her sister Agnes before the general assembling for supper. So she went to her room with all speed, for she had promised to write.

She had been there hardly over ten minutes when the door was brusquely thrown open, and her cousin Flora appeared—indignant in mien, and yet amused in a kind of way.

“Alison Blair,” said this ferocious termagant, who looked as if she wanted to fling something, and was inclined to laugh all the same, “I’m going to have a word with you. Oh yes, it’s all very well for you to look prim and innocent, Miss Dimity Puritan—open your big gray eyes,

do!—but this is what I've got to say to you: you may run away with Aunt Gilchrist's money, if you like, but you shan't carry off my sweetheart as well—there! Is that plain talking? You can't expect to have everything, surely! Do you hear?"

"Flora!" Alison said in blank amazement.

"Oh, I know! I've heard of your goings-on. I've heard of your adventures. Oh yes, and your tremendous courage and endurance and coolness—lightning-storms seem to come quite natural to you, for all as prim and mim as you are! But what business have you with my sweetheart?—that's what I want to know!"

Alison had risen; she was very pale.

"Flora, I thought you and Captain Macdonell were engaged—I made sure of it—and that is why I wished to be friends with him."

“Look how frightened she is!” said this strapping young damsel. “That’s what happens when the guilty are found out. Oh, I know the ways of you quiet ones. Well, I’m not going to quarrel,” she continued, with a sudden change of manner. “Take him. Take him, and welcome. A sweetheart more or less is nothing to me; I’ve got plenty of them, poor things; wait till you come to the Volunteer Ball, and you’ll see for yourself. But all the same it *was* shabby, Alison, the moment my back was turned!”

“Flora, will you speak reasonably for a moment?” Alison pleaded. “Will you listen? I made sure you were going to be married to Captain Macdonell. Isn’t it so?”

“Isn’t it so?” repeated the other. “Well, he hasn’t asked me, that’s to begin with; and, secondly, he isn’t likely to; and a-hundred-and-twenty-fifthly and lastly,

dear Miss Dimity, I wouldn't have him. But none the less I consider it remarkably cool of you to step in in this way ——”

“Flora!” called out Hugh from below. “Flora!—Alison!—Aunt Gilchrist wants you both. Look alive! Supper's just coming in.”

So Alison had to leave her letter unfinished; and as she went downstairs to the dining-room—a little bewildered, perhaps—she was hurriedly trying to recall all that had passed between herself and this young Captain Ludovick, who was not, as it appeared, her cousin's *fiancé* at all, but, as one might say, a stranger.

CHAPTER V.

A BOAT-LAUNCH.

BUT to Alison the astonishing thing about these good people, now that she saw them in the familiar intimacy of their own home and social circle, was the easy and contented way in which they took their life. Here was no studied mortification of all natural enjoyment ; no constant and anxious introspection ; no dwelling upon Death and Judgment as the only subjects worthy of human concern. The ordinary incidents of the day seemed to be for them sufficient ; a prevailing cheerfulness and good-humour attended both their occupations and their amusements ; and if there

were sharp words at times—especially when Aunt Gilchrist's peripheral neuralgia was wandering around—these sharp words left no morbid sting. Alison felt all this ; but she did not write to her sister about it, for it was difficult of explanation. But she was well aware (and perhaps with a little twinge of conscience at times) that she herself was being affected by this freer, this happier atmosphere. Gladness came with the first moment of her waking ; whether there was rain or sunlight outside, there would be beautiful, clear things to look at ; and gladness went with her down to the breakfast-table, where, whatever mischief and sarcasm might be flying about, there was always a covert intention of kindness. Alison, it is to be feared, was becoming a most worldly and careless and thoughtless person. She had forgotten all about Paley's "Evidences." She was as eager as any of the younger folk in their various

diversions and busy idleness ; she walked down every morning to the building-shed to see how the new boat was getting on, and Hugh quite tolerated her society now ; she made Master Johnny regret the day that ever he offered to be her servant, for she kept him rowing and rowing, while she practised until she got her hands hopelessly blistered ; she was ready at a moment's notice to run along and order the waggonette, when Aunt Gilchrist, out of the plentitude of her wealth, would go for a drive ; and she showed not the slightest hesitation when, as they pulled up at a certain hotel, she was bidden to go in and ask for Captain Macdonell, and invite him to join the small excursion. Aunt Gilchrist had come forth from her chamber in royal spirits ; somehow or other she had procured for herself a temporary mitigation of her neuralgic pains, while refusing to have anything to do with the drugs pre-

scribed by the doctors; and now she was waving a flag of triumph over her enemies, and singing a song of victory. But why, at such a juncture, she should have thought fit to include the Fort William ministers in the hosts she was supposed to have routed, it would be difficult to determine.

“What ails ye at the ministers, Jane?” said her sister-in-law, with a quiet smile. “If they trouble you as little as ye trouble them, I’m thinking you have little to complain of.”

“The bodies! The poor bits o’ bodies!” said Aunt Gilchrist, in the magnificence of her scorn. “They’re just alike with the doctors; they’re a’ tarred with the same stick; if you do not go to them there will be no mercy for you, in this world, or the next. Oh yes, the ministers have got their bits o’ bottles too, stoppered and labelled; ‘saving grace’ written on the outside; and they’re the only lawful and licensed dis-

pensers. They've got their iodides, I warrant ye, and their salicines, and their spirits of ammonia; and a fine stramash and roar they set up if ye go by and pay no heed to them. I'm told, Alison, ye heard a fine whirligig o' denouncing last Sunday; and all about what?—about that harmless bit of a temperance shanty they have put on the top of Ben Nevis; and of course it's to be torn down and scattered to the winds because it's a temptation to the young lads that leads them past the church door—the temptation to climb four thousand four hundred feet of a mountain, and at the top of it not a single glass of ale to slake their thirst! Poor fellows, it's no often they get a glimpse of the outside world, what with their work all the week, and then the chances of a wet day; and what harm can there be in going up that hill, when there's not even a dram to be got? But no, no; it's my consulting-room

ye've got to come to ; if ye do not use my bottles and phials and patent mixtures, then you're doomed. You'd think that no human creature could get to heaven without applying to them for a ticket——”

“Aunt Gilchrist,” said Alison, with a smile, “it wasn't so much the climbing of Ben Nevis that the minister was angry about, it was about Sabbath-breaking generally ; and he said that the college-boys at Fort Augustus played cricket on the Sabbath afternoons : now will you defend that ?”

But Aunt Gilchrist was not to be driven into a corner.

“They're Roman Catholics,” she answered, “and I will leave the Roman Catholics to defend themselves. But what I say is this : that the Lord made us all, and you may trust Him to look after us all—better than these dour-faced pulpit-thumpers imagine. Set them up with

their bells and their bells ! I will say this for the doctors, poor bodies : they may haver as much as ye like, and try to get ye to live on poisons, but they dinna claim the right to summon the whole population to their shops wi' a swinging and jangling of iron hammers. Mercy o' me ! the confusion of noise there is on a Sabbath morning, in this wee town of Fort William, passes everything."

"I thought I was back in Kirk o' Shields, auntie, when I first heard it," Alison said. "But the rest of the Sabbath day is very, very different from Kirk o' Shields."

"How, then ?" said Flora, who had just come in.

"Oh, well," the young lady continued, "here it is so brisk and cheerful to see the people come driving in to church in their dog-carts and waggonettes, and putting up at the inns ; and in the afternoon there is a good deal of strolling along the sea-

shore, or up the hills there; and then, in the evening, it is so pretty to see the boats taking the people home across the quiet loch——”

“Alison Blair, I am just ashamed to hear you!” Flora exclaimed. “Driving, walking, rowing on the Sabbath day—and you sit in that chair and describe such wickedness without wringing your hands! And do you know this, Aunt Gilchrist?—next Sunday she is coming to the Established Church with us—yes, indeed; she has promised. Just think of that! Poor thing—lost—lost!—gone over to Erastianism—a pervert from the faith of her forefathers!”

Indeed, sectarian differences appeared to bother these good folk very little, if at all; while as for the deeper mysteries of human life, and the possibilities surrounding it, these were never so much as mentioned among them. Aunt Gilchrist’s

easy-going formula, "The Lord made us, and He'll look after us," seemed to be tacitly adopted by all of them ; and it was hardly incumbent upon Alison, although she had been brought up among serious-minded people, to begin and rebuke them for their contented optimism. Aunt Gilchrist, having for the time being cast forth the neuralgic demons that had been tormenting her, was determined upon enjoying her new-found liberty to the full ; and although the excuse was that Alison ought to be shown all the neighbourhood around, the fact was that the old lady herself was passionately fond of a jaunt and its excitement. She herself was the gayest of the gay as the comfortable waggonette drove them away along the lonely glens, the sweet air blowing by them, the sun warm on the heather and the birches and the silver-gray rocks, the hills rising far above them into the cloud-

less blue. She had got a large luncheon-basket, most cunningly contrived, that could carry an abundance of provisions and render them independent of inns ; and they would halt at midday and have luncheon on some road-side knoll, where there were a few overhanging trees to shelter them from the sun. And supposing, in these still solitudes, that the day should turn to rain : what did Aunt Gilchrist care ? With rugs and water-proofs skilfully disposed, the little party seemed more snug and merry than ever ; and the old lady would sing away at her Scotch songs, which she declared were infinitely more inspiring and sensible than their Highland wails and lamentations. Nay, in defiance of the Doctor, she usually carried in the luncheon-basket a bottle of most excellent sherry ; and a glass of sherry and a biscuit (especially in these troublous times of wet) she maintained never harmed human creature.

“Aunt Gilchrist,” Alison would say, laughing, “you’re ‘working for what you’ll get.’”

“Oh yes, I know, I know,” she would answer scornfully ; “ye’ve heard the Doctor say that, poor body ! Duncan must aye be grumbling about something ; the last was the expense of hiring this waggonette, instead of taking the coach or the mail-gig. Well, and if it is an expense, we’re rid o’ they English tourists ; and we can stop where we like ; and we’ve better fun altogether. Then just consider, Alison : when this bit of a pleasure-making’s over, I’ll be going away for the whole winter into a Hydropathic, and living in penury and sackcloth and ashes—ay, and instead of a biscuit and a glass of sherry in the forenoon, and a drop o’ toddy the last thing at night, it will be soda-water, and seltzer-water, and potass-water, and maybe some o’ their bromides or iodides three

times a day. 'Working for what I'll get?'—very well, then : *I don't care* ; now is that enough for you ? ”

“ Quite enough, Aunt Gilchrist. But if your rheumatism should come back, you will remember I warned you.”

“ *You*—warn me ?—you impertinent minx ! What do you know about it ? And I tell you this, that my pains and sufferings are not to be called by any such common and ordinary name as rheumatism. Rheumatism ? My word ! It's a kind of rheumatism that has kept the doctors clashing their empty heads together for ever and ever so long, and they're not a bit wiser now than when they begun.” And thus would Aunt Gilchrist end the deadly feud.

Hugh Munro went with them on certain of those excursions ; but Ludovick Macdonell accompanied them always—he seemed to take it for granted that he was

to be their escort, whether he received a formal invitation or no. Alison, remembering her cousin's revelations, had resolved to treat Captain Macdonell with a certain reserve; but in this constant association she found it difficult—nay, impossible; any stiffness of demeanour on her part seemed to be thawed away by the sunny cheerfulness, the confidence, the imperturbable good-nature of the young man himself. He would not allow her to hold him at arm's length. He looked after her, as he looked after the others, in a masterful kind of way; he made no scruple about fastening a waterproof cape round her neck, or a thick rug round her knees; it was he, not she, who was judge as to whether she required another slice of cold lamb at lunch. And yet Alison instinctively felt that there was some little difference between his manner towards her and towards the others. He was not *quite* so masterful with her.

There was a consideration, a kind of gentleness and courtesy that he particularly showed towards her ; and that she attributed to the fact of her being a stranger. He seemed to take an especial care of her, when she was alighting from the waggonette, or coming along a gangway, or getting into the rowing-boat of an evening. Whatever babblement of talk was going on, the smallest remark that Alison made he was sure to hear, and to answer. It was "Miss Alison" now ; and while Miss Alison was made to do this and that, all for her own good, no doubt, his general supervision and authority over her : was always accompanied by a certain gentle consideration and respect. And who, indeed, was going to say that Miss Alison should not have the box-seat on the coach, and the thickest rug on board the steamer, and the window-view in the inn parlour, when she was at once a stranger and a guest ?

Aunt Gilchrist, who was a shrewd and observant little woman, was by no means blind to all these pretty little civilities and all this meek and courteous attention, and she thought she would address a few warning words, in a skilful and roundabout way, to the young laird of Oyre. One afternoon the four of them—Aunt Gilchrist, Captain Macdonell, Flora, and Alison—were over at Corpach. They had driven down Glenfinnan the previous day; had passed the night at Kinloch Aylort; and were now on their way back, waiting for the steamer to take them across to Fort William. As it chanced, Alison and Flora were walking up and down the pier together, talking, or idly looking over to the picturesque view of Inverlochy Castle and Ben Nevis that has been so often painted; and Captain Ludovick had sat down beside the old lady to keep her company. Here was an excellent opportunity.

“And when are ye going back to Oyre, Captain Macdonell?” Aunt Gilchrist said. “I’m afraid we have led ye into a great deal of idleness.”

“Oh, well,” he answered lightly, “there has been some business to keep me hanging about Fort William this last week or two. We are going to have some alterations made at Oyre; and there were the plans to be overhauled; and to-morrow I am to have the estimate. Then there is the launching of Hugh’s boat; that will be a great occasion; of course I must wait for that. Besides,” he added, “one doesn’t often get the chance of going about with so pleasant a party—and that’s the truth; and I’m very much obliged to you for letting me help in arranging these little trips, for of course we all want Miss Alison to see Lochaber to the best advantage.”

“Miss Alison?” the old dame repeated, with grave and inscrutable eyes. “Oh

yes, indeed. Miss Alison. Maybe there is some little attraction there?"

She did not look at him.

"Don't you think there is a great deal of attraction?" said he frankly. "I think so—and I don't care who knows it; I think there ought to be a great deal of attraction for any one; and it isn't merely her good looks and her pretty figure—these are obvious enough; and it isn't merely her kindly disposition—for lots of people have that; but—but—there's something more. She has got her head screwed on straight, and that's the fact. At first she was rather shy and reserved; but ever since she came here she seems to have been growing brighter and merrier every day; and can't she hold her own, if there's any kind of joking and quarrelling going on! Why, it has been quite delightful," continued Captain Ludovick, who seemed to have found an interesting subject, "to watch her

become more and more at home, and happier and brighter every day. I fancy that Kirk o' Shields must be an awful place. She has given me some hints about the kind of life the people live there, and I think she is rather glad to be out of it for a time ; though she declares she has come into a land peopled by Sadducees. But she has a wonderfully fair and even and well-balanced mind, and a clear and quick brain ; and if you show her that such or such a thing is reasonable and harmless, and so forth, she accepts it, no matter what her upbringing has been. Of course you recollect, Mrs. Gilchrist, that it was you who taught her ' catch-the-ten ; ' and you see now who is the first to propose it, when the supper-things have been removed."

But Aunt Gilchrist was not to be put off her purpose ; this rambling panegyric was all very well, but it was not business.

“I’m very pleased to hear ye say so,” she observed, with much deliberation; “very pleased indeed. For I confess to a liking for the bit lady; and I’m glad to know that in the eyes of other folk she has attractions—and attractions in her own right, so that she is not dependent on what others may do for her. Now, I’m going to be frank with ye, Captain Macdonell, and I’ll tell ye why I like to hear my bit lady well spoken of, and for her own sake alone. When the doctors have done their worst wi’ me, and I must go—and indeed there needna be much regret about departing for another world if it’s a Hydropathic ye happen to be living in at the time—there’s a little money I’ve to leave behind me; and both my poor husband and myself were of one mind that it should go to Alison—or the bulk of it, at least. But that’s just as I choose; I may leave it to her, or not leave it to her. Now

attend to this: what's the value of the solemn will and testament of a wretched creature that suffers from neureetis? Why, as long as he or she is alive, not a brass farthing! Not a single penny, I tell ye! A twinge goes through your ankle: there's a flare-up of a quarrel: a new will made instanter, and the money goes to somebody else. That's the way of it. If King David was alive—poor man, he said some sensible things when he wasna aye groaning away at his supplications—King David would say, 'Put not your trust in princes; no, nor in anybody that has got peripheral neuralgia.' So ye understand, Captain Ludovick, why it is I'm pleased that my niece Alison is attractive on her own account, for it is entirely possible that she will never get a farthing from me."

This intimation—which in the end was plain and clear enough, notwithstanding the cunning and roundabout way it had

been introduced—did not seem to disconcert the young laird. As Alison and Flora were coming up at the moment, all he could say was—

“ I don’t think your niece will ever have to depend on *that* attraction, Mrs. Gilchrist ; but neither do I think that you and she are likely to quarrel.”

When at length they got over to Fort William, they found Hugh Munro waiting for them on the quay (a most unexpected honour), with the great news that his sailing-boat was quite finished, and ready to be launched on the following morning. As they walked along to the house, he somewhat shyly suggested to Alison that she might perform the christening ceremony ; and Alison cheerfully assented—merely stipulating that she should be told what to do. But when they would have him finally declare what he had resolved to call the new craft, he became evasive.

They would know in the morning, he said. He wanted to see how the name looked—in blue letters on the band of white under the gunwale.

“Oho!” cried Flora. “Then to-morrow we are to get at the grand secret, Alison! I believe it’s that Irish girl who was at Ballachulish with the Macphersons; you’ll see the boat will be called ‘Norah,’ or ‘Rosina,’ or ‘Kathleen’: do you know, he was quite civil to her; he actually stood by the piano, and turned over her music for her—I wonder when he would do that for any of us!”

However, Hugh would say nothing further; and during the rest of the evening, whenever the morrow’s celebration was spoken of, it was chiefly to assure Alison that her duties would be extremely simple. Nor was there to be much of an assemblage: the Doctor would be away attending to his professional duties; Mrs. Munro would

be looking after her household ; Aunt Gilchrist did not care to walk so far (periphery forbidding) ; and they certainly did not mean to take the fiend Johnny with them on the inaugural trip, and have him wishing all the time for the joy of some mighty disaster. Not only that, but the designer and owner of the craft intimated to the two girls that, after the christening ceremony, they might as well return home : Ludovick and he meant to have a serious trial of the boat and her sails ; and it would be a mistake (as he hinted) to have useless baggage on board.

The ceremony, as it turned out, was of the briefest. On this bright, breezy, sunny morning the four of them walked along to the building-yard, and found the trim, shining, newly varnished boat fixed in an improvised slip, with a gallant bunch of white heather at her bowsprit. Alison, with a modest little bottle in her hand,

came forward blithely enough to perform her part ; but when she got to the stem of the boat she suddenly paused, and a quick flush overspread her pale face ; for there, before her, on the white band, in neat, small letters of blue, she beheld the name that had been chosen—THE BIT LADY. Hugh was shy, and hung back ; Flora was laughing ; but Ludovick Macdonell, who was by Alison's side, took the bottle from her, cut the strings, released the cork, and returned it to her ; whereupon she poured a little of the wine over the bow, and managed to say, " Good luck—and—and—I hope she will be everything that has been expected of her—and—and good weather !"—which, alas ! was all unlike the neat little speech she had prepared. Then with a cheer the boat was run down the slip into the water, and held there ; the builder's men had a glass of whiskey apiece, to drink her good-fortune ; and

forthwith, as Macdonell and Hugh got on board, and began to haul the sails about, the two young ladies took their departure.

“And what do you think of yourself now?” demanded Miss Flora of her companion (who, in truth, was extremely mortified that she had made such a muddle of her benediction). “I believe you were in the secret all the time. Oh, it’s you quiet ones who know how to come out with a dramatic effect! The pretty confusion—the pretty embarrassment—the pretty, stammering little speech! Very well done—very well done indeed—you hypocrite and actress! But there’s one thing perhaps you’re not aware of; it wasn’t Hugh who ever thought of calling the boat after you; no, it wasn’t. Don’t you go and pride yourself, Miss Dimity, with the notion that you have found favour in the eyes of my lord the Sultan. What can you do better than any of us? Can

you drive a nail in straight? Are you ever correct about the direction of the wind? Can you mark a tennis-court, or fold a newspaper, or, indeed, do anything right? Can you strap up a portmanteau without making a fool of yourself? Well, now, that is too bad!" continued Miss Flora, suddenly shifting her ground. "You don't know what trouble I take in packing his portmanteau for him—remembering twenty things he would be sure to have forgotten, and putting them all in their places, and folded and arranged, instead of shovelling them together, as he would do. Then, when everything is ready to be sent downstairs, my lord comes in; he looks at the portmanteau; catches hold of a strap—and of course it's sure to yield a little if you pull at it with the strength of a rhinoceros; he nods his head, as much as to say, 'I thought so; this is the way a girl buckles a strap;' then he hauls each

strap until he has got each buckle three holes tighter, and goes away with a contemptuous look. And do you think he considers you anything more accurate, or handy, or fit to live than the rest of us? I bet you now, if he asked you to guess the distance over to the other side of the loch there, you would be at least half a mile out; and he wouldn't remonstrate with you; he'd only look at you as if to say, 'I wonder what tempted Providence to create such a set of helpless idiots as girls are!' So don't you flatter yourself, Miss Dimity Puritan, that you have won any favour. You're only a girl—your pronunciation of Latin is always wrong—you're frightened of cows—you can't do anything right. But if you would like to know who put that idea into his head of calling the boat after you——”

“Who, then, Flora?” her companion asked; but the big gray eyes were down-

cast, and there was a slight flush on the pale face that seemed to say that Miss Alison had guessed the answer to her own question.

“Why, Ludovick Macdonell, of course!” the other said. “Isn’t it as clear as day?”

CHAPTER VI.

UEBER ALLEN GIPFELN.

WELL, *The Bit Lady* was duly launched, and her sailing powers tested again and again; but nevertheless Ludovick Macdonell seemed to be in no hurry to return to Oyre. Perhaps the plans and specifications wanted further amending; perhaps the contractor's estimate was excessive; at all events, Captain Macdonell remained in Fort William, and very much at the service of the Munroes and of Miss Alison their guest. It was not "Alison" as yet, but matters were tending in that direction; for the young man carried his good-humoured straightforwardness to the verge of audacity;

and these four companions had been much together. They left Johnny ashore now when they went away lythe-fishing as the evening fell. Alison had got on capitally with her rowing, and she was fond of it ; and she preferred to ply a lazy oar in concert with Captain Ludovick, while Flora and Hugh, in the stern of the boat, looked after the rods, and the lines, and the large white flies. Sometimes the fishing was not heeded much. Sometimes they merely rowed, and quietly talked and listened—the hills around them growing darker and more dark, but the loch reflecting a wan and steely gray from the pale splendour still hanging in the north-western heavens. The charm of the twilight was enough for them : the birds all gone to rest ; an odour of sea-weed in the slumbering air ; an orange ray, trembling down on the mystic expanse of the water, telling of some cottage-window under the black

woods opposite ; a point of red and a point of green far in the south—the sailing-lights of a yacht lying there becalmed. Then the long and idle pull home ; the first white stars becoming visible in the transparent heavens ; a string of golden beads along the distant shore showing them the little town for which they were making. Hugh would now take Alison's place, sending her to sit side by side, and arm in arm, with Flora. And when either brother or sister began to sing one of those old Gaelic airs, instantly there was the other voice joining in, softly and with exquisite harmony, in this silence broken only by the measured plash of the oars. These were magical, lambent nights. When Alison, long afterwards, in Kirk o' Shields, tried to recall them, it seemed to her as if they were far too wonderful and beautiful—as if they never could have been.

But meanwhile there came along the long-talked-of night pilgrimage to the summit of Ben Nevis, with the hope of witnessing the sun rise over the German Ocean; and when the appointed evening arrived, everything seemed to be propitious. The weather had been fine for some days before; the glass was high and steady; the few light airs wandering about hardly stirred the glassy surface of the loch. Accordingly, all preparations were made; and when they were ready to start, Johnny was sent on in advance with the two ponies, and directed as to where he should wait for the little party outside the town.

Johnny was a very proud lad as he set forth; for although his savage manners had not been softened by any acquaintance with the graceful palæstra, he bestrode his meek-eyed animal with much dignity, leading the other pony—the sumpter-pony,

which carried the slung water-proofs and what not—by the bridle-rein, while in his right hand he bore sceptre-wise a stout oaken cudgel. Nor was his dignity of demeanour, as he passed in stately fashion along the main street of Fort William, sacrificed to that love of adventure which was dear to his heart. It is true that once or twice he tried hard to ride over and scatter a group of sprawling urchins; but this was of no avail, for the small boys of Fort William knew John, and fled at his approach as minnows flee from a marauding pike. Again, when he was nearly out of the town, he aimed a playful blow at a mongrel cur that happened to be wandering there; but he missed—his stick being too short; whereupon the mongrel replied with a sudden and vicious snarl, which caused Johnny's pony to swerve so violently that its rider was very nearly thrown into the middle of the highway.

John turned in his saddle and regarded the now departing cur, so as to fix its appearance firmly in his memory.

“You duffle!” he said. “I will not forget you. No, my young boy, I will not forget you! I will gif you something before many days are over—something that will be ferry good for you.”

And then he went on again, grinning to himself; for he knew of many and divers schemes of vengeance which he could leisurely pick and choose from before returning from the top of Ben Nevis to his own familiar haunts and occupations.

Flora, Alison, Hugh, and Ludovick Macdonell had by this time started; and a very gay and merry little group they were as they left the town. For one thing, there was a spice of adventure in this expedition: even Alison had got to understand that it was the unexpected that usually happened in the mysterious

solitudes of Ben Nevis. But at present everything seemed most promising; the evening was clear and golden as they passed along the highway, crossed the bridge, and followed the path by the river-bank; the mellow light was still warm on the foliage overhanging the stream; and a scent of new-mown hay hung in the air, for there was not a breath of wind. With reasonable luck they could almost count on a beautiful morning; and, what was also of some small importance, they could almost make sure of a clear starlit night to enable Johnny to get the ponies down in safety, there being no shelter for these animals at the top.

By the time they had got to the point at which the rude pathway leaves the wide valley of Glen Nevis and begins the ascent of the lower slopes of the mountain, the golden evening had given place to a silver-clear twilight, and the slender sickle of the

new moon was visible over the sombre masses of hills in the south. Here Johnny was waiting ; and when Flora and Alison had been properly and carefully mounted on the ponies the procession set forth. First went Flora, with Hugh as her attendant ; then came Alison, with Captain Ludovick walking by her pony's head, his fingers just touching the bridle-rein ; Johnny was left to lag behind as he chose, but with the knowledge that present laziness and comfort would only make his midnight descent so much the later. At first the way was not very steep ; the ponies got along easily enough ; and Alison was delighted to find, in contradiction of her fears, that she had no difficulty at all in holding on. Then if the night seemed closing down on the world, there was still a clear twilight around them, in which all the neighbouring objects—the rocks and knolls and chasms and trickling

streams—were strangely distinct. Indeed, it was altogether a joyous setting-out. The two young ladies were calling to each other ; Alison in especial was in the highest spirits, and was so fearless and careless that her companion had to warn her to take heed a little when her pony was making its way across the rough stones in the bed of some shallow rivulet. She wanted to know when they were to be allowed to get down and walk. Would they go near the tarn where he and she had been caught in a thunder-storm ? When should they be able to see the lights in Fort William ?—or was that not possible at all ?

But as they got farther and farther up into the awful solitude of the hills, and as they seemed to be leaving the world they had known farther and farther below them, there was less talking ; and when they came to a rude little wooden bridge span-

ning a burn—and here on the bit of level they rested the ponies for a breathing-space—it was in silence they contemplated their vast and lonely surroundings. There was still a lambent glow in the north-western heavens ; but the world beneath them seemed to have grown dark ; a gray mist filled the silent valleys. Alison saw the crescent moon reflected on some distant sheet of smooth water, but she did not know whether that was a solitary little lake among the hills, or an in-winding arm of the sea ; and as no one was speaking at the time she did not ask. Then they resumed their upward toil, following the rough path that zigzagged up the mighty shoulders and slopes ; while the night came on apace, and the first of the small, twinkling diamond-points began to show in the wan sky overhead.

By-and-by Ludovick Macdonell touched her on the arm to draw her attention.

Then she could hear that Flora and Hugh were singing some song or ballad together. She could hardly make out the words, though Macdonell knew them well enough—

*“ The stars are all burning cheerily, cheerily,
Ho ro, Mairi dhu, turn to me !
The sea-mew is mourning drearly, drearly,
Ho ro, Mairi dhu, turn to me ! ”*

—but the air was plaintive and tender, and their intermingling voices, even amid the clatter of the ponies' hoofs, made a strangely effective harmony in the silence and the dark. For dark it had now become, although the stars overhead were shining more and more clearly. She could hardly make out the path before her, or above her, rather, but she knew that it had become exceedingly steep and exceedingly rough, from the straining and stumbling of the patient animal that carried her. And as far as the starlight could

show her anything of her immediate surroundings, she saw that here no longer were steep grassy slopes scarred with water channels, but blocks of sterile rock heaped upon one another, and apparently rising perpendicularly into the sky. There were no more soft, retreating outlines in the dusk; these black masses were sharp and angular; and sharp, too, were the turns of the now invisible path. This upward struggle seemed interminable. The labouring animals fought gallantly; but now there was no little bit of a level bridge to give them a rest; there was nothing but this continuous, indomitable strain; the foot-falls on the splintered stones; the black rocks all around; the white stars overhead.

And then—as it appeared to her—and still far beyond them and above them—her startled eyes beheld three squares of crimson light. She was astonished beyond

measure. She had grown accustomed to the black solitudes and the silence ; she had come to think there was nothing above her but that great vault of stars : what were these strange illuminations ? Had they toiled upward from the valleys of the world, to find before them the mystic gates of heaven ? And now she found that the pony was going with less of an upward strain ; and Macdonell (who had not spoken to her for some time back, having to save his breath for the climbing) was leading the animal carefully forward over the loose stones ; and at length her bewildered eyes made out that they were nearing some dark object, of unknown dimensions, and that these three squares of crimson were windows with red blinds. The next minute a blaze of yellow light came forth into the dark ; Flora, she saw, was getting down from her pony ; presently they were all standing at the open door,

giving one look backward to the clear-throbbing skies (there Capella was burning; and the misty Pleiades; the pale mother of Andromeda displayed her trembling jewels; and Arcturus shone from afar) before they passed into the common room of this remote little caravanserai, where a pleasant welcome and a blazing fire awaited them.

And now the long-pent-up flood of talk broke loose; for these were new experiences, and so far the expedition had been wholly successful; besides, they were glad to get into this warm and friendly shelter after passing through the bleak and dark solitudes. Very soon there was a sumptuous banquet of ham and eggs smoking on the table before them; and as this light-hearted little group of friends sat round the hospitable board, they fell to talking about the great masses of population far away beneath them—the popu-

lation of Great Britain, in fact—in dining-rooms and drawing-rooms, in lecture-rooms and concert-rooms, sitting in theatres, dressing for balls, busy with the endless amusements and occupations of modern life. And Captain Ludovick not only claimed for his companions that they constituted the uppermost circle of all the social circles in Great Britain, but maintained that, viewed from their sublime elevation, all other gradations of rank and position and dignity were as nothing at all—were as half-invisible lines. They were not quite sure but that the scientific gentleman in the observatory might be their superior by a few feet; at all events, he was their only rival as to pride of place in the three kingdoms. And presently there came another to share their glory—Johnny, to wit—who put his head in at the door to announce his arrival.

Johnny was exceedingly sulky when he

came in, for the last part of the ascent had been more than he had bargained for, and he was breathless and tired and beaten ; but when he was directed to sit down at a small table, and presented with a lavish supper—moreover, Captain Ludovick was so kind as to order for him a bottle of that delectable beverage, ginger ale, which Johnny had never before tasted—he got into a much better humour ; and an occasional twinkle in his eye showed that he heard plainly enough what was going on at the other table.

“Well, Johnny,” said Flora, turning to him, “and what do you think of Ben Nevis now ?”

“Well,” said he, with his mouth half full, but with his small eyes alert enough, “I wass thinking ahl the way up that it wass a ferry stupid thing to make a hull as big as thus. A ferry foolish thing. It is no use to any one, except to break your legs.

What is the use of a hull so big as thus ? But mebbe," he added, as an afterthought—and a pleasing grin suffused his face—" mebbe some day it will fall down on the top of Fort William. Cosh, there would be many a one get a sore head that day !"

" How are you going down again, Johnny ? " she continued. " Are you going to ride the one pony and let the other follow ? "

" Not me," said he instantly. " I do not wish to go over and break my neck."

" How will you get them down, then ? " she asked.

" I will put them on the track and drive them both before me," said he. " They can see in the dark well enough, them beasts—better than me, anyway." And then he glanced at Captain Macdonell, of whom he was always somewhat afraid. " And a good thing is thus," he continued, with a furtive snigger about his

mouth, "that if the Duffle is wandering about they will knock against him first. Cosh, that would be a fine sight, to see him go head over heels down a gully!"

"As if you could see him in the dark!" said she.

"Bit why not?" he remonstrated; and there was a sort of vindictive joy in his face. "Wouldn't there be sparks of fire flying from him, he would be in such a rage?"

"I'd advise you to hurry up, my young friend," Captain Ludovick interposed, "and get those animals started off while the night is still clear. And you'd better play no pranks, mind, Master Johnny; if you lame one of those ponies you'll get something that'll make you wish you never had come within twenty miles of Lochaber."

Johnny took the hint in quite good part, for the bountiful supper and the ginger ale had comforted him exceedingly; and it was

with a merry allusion to the probability of his encountering the Duffle on his way down that he untethered the ponies, took the leading one by the bridle, and disappeared into the silence of the night.

“But if he were really to be frightened on the way down?” said Alison, when they had returned to the comfortable little table near the fire. “If he were to imagine he saw something?”

“Oh no; trust the thickness of Johnny’s skull for that,” Hugh Munro said, with a smile. “He’ll go whistling and singing all the way down to Fort William. That dark and demoniacal imagination of his doesn’t reach as high as that; it deals with little things, and mostly with the birds and beasts he finds around him in actual life. When he talks about the big Duffle it’s only to alarm the small boys, or to make jokes for you—if he thinks Ludovick won’t fling something at him;

what Johnny is really superstitious about, what he fears, is the mischief that may be done himself by dangerous creatures—toads, adders, stinging jelly-fish, congers, and things of that kind; yes, and cats. He has an abject fear of cats—they're witches, he says—and if he can shy a stone at one when it doesn't see him, that is delight; but if it happens to turn its head, then Johnny drops the stone and looks at the sky, as innocent as you could think. But the rascal is not easily frightened, as a rule; no, the mischief with him, if he is in a boat, is that he will risk any danger for the sake of an adventure. You'll have a steamer blowing and blowing her whistle, and that fellow will keep on, trying to clear her, unless you knock him aside and jam down the helm."

"That's all very well," said Captain Ludovick, who, indeed, was not so lenient towards Johnny's impish freaks and fan-

tasies as the others. "I don't mind his risking his own carcase for the enjoyment of a collision, but I object to his putting anybody else into danger. And you know he lost his head entirely that day he took Alison out in the boat." (It was "Alison" now, but perhaps this was a mere inadvertence.) "Why did he never get a good sound drubbing for playing that prank?"

"Because I was responsible for the whole affair," the young lady said promptly; "and if anybody is to be beaten, you must beat me."

"No, I won't beat you," said Captain Ludovick graciously; "but I'm going to send you all to bed, for you'll be called early in the morning, and you must try to get what sleep you can."

As it turned out, there was to be no sleep for Alison, or next to none, when she retired to the small chamber that had been allotted her. Towards midnight a wind

arose, and gradually it increased, until it could be heard sweeping across the mountain-top in long, plaintive sighs and wails. The firmly fixed little wooden shanty did not shake, did not even tremble, but the force of the wind could be gathered from the shriller and shriller note that seemed to be the precursor of a storm. Alison lay and listened to the bodeful sound; sometimes she slumbered off a little; then this ominous cry would wake her again, and she would wonder when the window would begin to show in the dark. And at last the welcome light appeared; there was a small square of faint bluish-gray in her apartment now; and she thought she would not wait to be called. What was the use of lying here, listening to the moaning of the wind? She got up and dressed very quietly; then she made her way into the common room, where the supper-things of the previous night were

still on the table; she went to the door, lifted the latch, and passed outside.

At first she could see nothing at all. A cold gray mist was driving by, enveloping everything, so that she could only make out a few wet stones at her feet; and she dared not move a yard away from the door. But presently this small horizon began to widen; she saw more and more of the stones; then a sudden cessation of them, as if that were the edge of the little plateau; and she thought she might venture along to look into the chasm beyond. She went cautiously, for these stones were large and angular; besides, she was trying to fix in her brain the whereabouts of the wooden shanty, so that she might be able to make her way back in the event of the fog closing in upon her again. But when she got along to the edge of the chasm all was blank. There was nothing before her but a waste of gray. So she thought

the others were just as well advised to remain within-doors; clearly there was to be no sunrise.

But nevertheless this mysterious, formless vacancy kept moving in a singular manner; vague phantoms seemed to pass through it; a kind of fascination kept her there, as if she knew that something must happen. And what happened first of all was that the heavens seemed to open over her head; she quickly looked up, and behold! the zenith was of a pale, clear purple, perfectly cloudless and serene. The light around her appeared to increase; out of the white gulf before her rose a sterile crag, silent and awful; and there was a bronze hue on the bare, rocky slopes, as if they faced some unknown radiance. Then all of a sudden it seemed as if the plateau on which she stood were lifted out of these interchanging vapours, and she was bidden to look abroad on a

newly created universe. Far away to the east, between her and the horizon, and almost level with her feet, stretched an interminable sea of clouds—vast mountainous masses they were, solid, slowly moving, their upper ridges touched with saffron, the intervening spaces of a shadowy, impenetrable blue. Far away to the west, again, she caught a glimpse of some lower region—of darkened hills and sombre valleys, with the wan waters of Loch Eil lying still and gray in the strange twilight. But it was the wonders that were occurring around her and before her that claimed all her attention now, startling her, bewildering her, and eventually paralyzing her with a blind, dumb sense of terror. For this seemed a dreadful thing—this rising of awful shapes out of that vast witches' caldron—sterile peaks and scarred precipices that slowly revealed themselves as if called up by some mighty

magician, and as slowly disappeared again into the gloom. She seemed to be looking on at the creation of a world; but a phantasmal world; a world of spectral and shadowy cliffs and crags; whereas the solid and substantial things were the mountain-masses of cloud that she could see far below her, slow-rolling one over the other, and ever advancing, silent and threatening, until they blotted out of existence those barren heights and those lurid gulfs that a moment before had themselves seemed so terrible. And sometimes, in their slow advance, those orange-crested, gigantic billows would rise and rise, as if they were about to overwhelm her also, and the bit of rock on which she stood. Her head grew faint and giddy. The earth seemed to have no foundation. She was but a phantom in this world of phantoms: when should she, too, disappear into that awful abyss? The vision

of the prophet Jeremiah was before her :
“ I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was without form, and void ; and the heavens, and they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and, lo, they trembled, and all the hills moved lightly. I beheld, and, lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens were fled.” She seemed to have no power to go or to stay ; the fascination of this awful phantasmagoria held her there ; and yet she knew that her footing was quite unstable ; all things were as a dream. And then, without warning, in a moment, the fate that she had feared befell her ; she was surrounded, isolated, cut off from all the rest of the world, nothing visible to her but the piece of rock on which she stood. In vain, and with quickened terror, she turned this way and that to gain some knowledge of her position : she was conscious only that close by her, on which side she knew not, was

that frightful abyss, and that a single step might launch her into its unknown deeps. She shrank back from this hideous chaos, and yet dared not move ; the white mists seemed to choke her ; her knees would no longer bear her weight ; and while some vague, wild cry of " Alison ! Alison !" rang in her ears, she sank to the ground unconscious, and lay there as if life itself had fled from her.

When she came to herself, a few minutes thereafter, she was in her own small room, whither Ludovick Macdonell had carried her, and Flora was standing by her bedside. No sooner did she open her eyes than she shuddered and drew back, as if she still thought she was on the verge of that ghastly precipice ; but Flora was holding her hand, and gently chafing it. She was for getting up forthwith, but this was not to be thought of, Flora insisted ; it would be some hours before they set out

on the return journey ; Alison must drink some hot tea, and lie still, and if possible get some sleep.

“Why, what a fright you gave us, Alison!” Flora said, when she saw that her cousin was almost recovered. “We did not know you had gone out. We thought you might just as well be left alone in your room, since there was to be no sunrise ; and then it was Ludovick who noticed that your door had been left a little bit open, and he bade me go and see. I can tell you we got a horrible fright when we found you had been out all the time, and by yourself ; and just as we set out to look for you, the mist came over, and we were more frightened than ever. Didn’t you hear us calling ? Do you know that when Ludovick found you, you were just at the edge of that terrible precipice where the snow is ?”

Alison shivered slightly.

“Yes, I know. I—I tried to come away and I couldn’t—I was afraid to move. But I’m all right now, Flora ; and if we are to be here for some hours yet, won’t you go and lie down ?”

“Well, yes, I will, then,” her cousin said. “And you’d better get some sleep too, Alison. Why, the idea of your going out in a place like this all by yourself, and at such an hour—no wonder you were frightened out of your senses !”

As it chanced, Alison did eventually fall into a profound, if far from dreamless, sleep, and they did not choose to disturb her ; so that it was a little after ten o’clock before the little party were ready to begin the descent of the mountain. Their down-going was not nearly so merry as their up-coming ; for it was evident to the others that Captain Macdonell was unusually grave and preoccupied. He was very kind to Alison ; bidding her take plenty of

time and not hurry over those loose stones which offered so insecure a foothold ; and carrying her water-proof for her, when the occasional heavy showers were followed by a burst of hot sunshine. But his customary light-heartedness was gone ; he seemed to be thinking back over something or other ; and he only brightened up a little when at length they were all down in Glen Nevis, and Alison safely seated in the waggonette that he had ordered to meet them there.

It was a day or two after these occurrences that Flora made a little confession—or revelation, rather—to her cousin.

“ Do you know, Alison,” said she—and she regarded her companion’s face as she spoke, yet with no inimical scrutiny—“ that Ludovick was terribly put about when he found you lying on the rocks and brought you in ? I believe he hardly knew what he was saying ; I fancy he considered himself responsible for having

advised you to go up there ; and the possibility of your having come to harm frightened him terribly. Do you know what he said when he carried you in ? He declared that if you had fallen over the precipice, he would have gone over too—that he would never have come down to Fort William alive.”

And it was remarkable, from that day henceforth, that even among Flora’s wildest jests and jibes and whimsicalities, never a word more was heard of her petulant, half-laughing taunt that Alison had stolen away her sweetheart from her.

CHAPTER VII.

AT OYRE HOUSE.

ALAS ! the time was now fast approaching when Alison would have to leave this enchanted land (for it was an enchanted land to her, at all events); and Captain Ludovick, who meanwhile had carried home his plans and estimates, and come back to Fort William, was quite distressed that nothing had been settled about the long-projected visit to Oyre. Eventually he went to Flora, and besought her, as a great kindness to himself, to get Aunt Gilchrist definitely to fix a day ; and Flora undertook the task with a light heart.

But this was a most luckless morning ;

for no sooner had the young lady broached the subject than she found herself suddenly and furiously attacked, without rhyme or reason, and overwhelmed with bitter and angry reproaches. Flora, who instantly perceived that the demon Neuritis was wandering around, was for beating an immediate retreat ; but she was not allowed to go before she had received some information regarding herself. She was a thoughtless, inconsiderate, ungrateful minx ; she had no care or concern for any one but herself ; her elders and their sufferings and afflictions were of no account with her ; only her own idle amusements and follies were uppermost in her empty head. Nay, more—she was accused of being involved in a base and vile conspiracy.

“ Oh, ay,” said the fierce little dame, “ ye may think, because I’m old, I’m blind. I’m not blind, I tell ye ; I can see as well as any of ye. And I know these High-

land lairds ; they've not a penny to bless themselves with ; but of course if ye get that lad Macdonell to marry Alison, then it's me that will have to pay the piper. That's your pretty scheme, is it?—and everybody's comfort to be sacrificed to it, ay, even if your very life should be put in danger by the shaking and travelling ! I know fine what he's after ; and I'll be bound she's willing enough too : havena I seen the blood jump to her face when she heard his foot outside on the gravel ? A pretty pact it is amongst ye all !—and ye think I'm blind—— ”

“ You may say what you like about me, Aunt Gilchrist,” Flora remarked, with perfect good-nature, “ but you need not say such things about Alison, for you don't believe them, to begin with. I am pretty certain that no such idea has ever entered into her head. No, nor into Ludovick's head either ; but, if it had, what could be

more natural ? He has birth, and she will have money—— ”

“ She will have money ? ” Aunt Gilchrist repeated, with a fresh explosion of wrath. “ Who said she will have money ? ”

“ Why, you yourself, Aunt Gilchrist ! ” said Flora.

“ How dare you stand there, Flora Munro, and tell such stories ! ” the old lady exclaimed. “ How dare you ! Haven’t I told every one of ye, over and over again, that she may never have a farthing ? Haven’t I told Macdonell too ? Haven’t I warned him, as plain as any woman could speak ? ”

“ Well, if he understands that, where is the harm of his wanting to marry Alison ? —that is, if he does, for I’m sure I don’t know anything about it.”

But this cool indifference only seemed to anger the old lady the more.

“ I know what your fine arguments are

worth!" she cried. "I know your hypocritical ways. Brazenness isn't always in the face, my young madam; it may be in the conscience, let me tell you that, miss. Go away and send Alison to me!"

Flora was well content to go; and very soon she found Alison.

"Aunt Gilchrist wants you," she said cheerfully. "And you're going to catch it."

"What for?" said Alison, wondering.

"Oh, I don't know. Periphery is meandering about, I suppose; and it's too early to get her to take some port-wine negus. So off you go, Alison, my loving dear, and get your whipping."

But it was not at all as a repentant and frightened child that Miss Dimity Puritan now entered her aunt's room. For a young woman, she had acquired a quite sufficient sense of her own dignity. In her earlier days she had always been "the bit lady;" and, now she was grown up,

she was perhaps a little more serious-minded than many of her years. When she opened the door and went in, and closed it behind her, she was perfectly calm and self-possessed. This was not at all the kind of person to fear or to brook a whipping.

“What did you send that girl Flora to me for?” was the abrupt demand. “You hadn’t the courage to come yourself, I suppose? But ye’re all in the same pact—all in the same pact—and not one o’ ye caring for anything but your own selfish ends and enjoyments. Enjoyments? A pretty enjoyment for me to go away harling here and harling there out o’er the country when I can scarcely put my foot to the ground to cross the room. But what do you care about that, you or any one o’ them?”

“Indeed, Aunt Gilchrist, I do not want you to go to Oyre if you would rather

not," Alison said quite simply. "And I'm sure I didn't send Flora to you—I believe it was Captain Macdonell who asked her. But I'm certain of this, that not one of us would wish you to go if it would cost you any trouble——"

" 'One of us ? ' " the old dame repeated bitterly. " Ay, there ye are ! There's the cat out o' the bag. A pact among ye to deceive a poor old woman who'll soon enough be away from amongst ye. And then perhaps ye'll be sorry. Selfishness is a fine thing for the young, but it's no so fine to look back on when they that should have been treated different have been taken away."

" Aunt Gilchrist, I don't know what you mean by talking like that ! " Alison said somewhat proudly. " We thought you would be as pleased to go as any one, and no one wished you to go against your will. I don't see where there was any selfishness

or deceit; and—and it isn't fair to talk like that, and about so small a thing."

"Oh yes, I'm always in the wrong!" Aunt Gilchrist exclaimed, with a toss of her head. "I'm the tyrant. You are all poor, suffering victims, and I'm a selfish monster. Say it!—oh yes, say it! I know ye say it amongst yourselves: I'm just a monster of selfishness. But what brought ye here, to Fort William, I want to know? Was it to go galivanting about the country when other folk can scarcely stir from their chair? What did ye come here for? To go prancing down to the shore and back from the shore—and stravaiging about the place?"

Alison had turned a little pale.

"I came here, Aunt Gilchrist," she said, "because you were my mother's sister, and because you asked me to come; and—and because you had been kind to me many a time before." For a brief second

her voice was not so firm, but only for a second; and she held her head erect. "And I was going home in a day or two, as you know; but if you do not wish me here I would rather not stay. I am ready to go at once."

"Go if you like, then!" the other said snappishly.

Alison hesitated for a moment, but there was no recalling of the ungracious words.

"Good-bye, Aunt Gilchrist!" she said.

In spite of herself tears rose to her eyes, and she stood there irresolute, not wishing to make any advance, and yet waiting for some small sign of farewell.

"Oh, go away if you like," said the irascible small dame, without looking up. "I don't want you. Your room's better than your company." And then, suddenly, a twinge of pain shot across her contracted forehead. "Here, Alison, come and unbutton my boots, will ye? I'd just like to

ding that man o' a shoemaker—sending me home a pair o' boots like this when well he knew what state my feet were in !”

Dutifully Alison went forward, and knelt down and undid the buttons ; and the next moment Aunt Gilchrist had snatched the boots from her, and hurled them, one after the other, with savage vehemence to the end of the room. Then she said, in quite an altered voice—

“ Now, Ailie, my dear, ye'll find my cloth slippers over there under the sofa, and ye'll bring them and tie them on soft, soft.”

Alison went and fetched the slippers, and proceeded to get them on with the most careful and assiduous gentleness. As she was thus engaged, she felt a hand placed lightly on her head.

“ How like your hair is to your mother's, Ailie : every day I see it more and more.”

And then both hands were placed on her shoulders ; and Aunt Gilchrist was stooping down as if she would speak to her niece without being seen ; and the girl knew that the old woman's cheek was wet with tears.

“ Ailie, my lass—Ailie, my dear,” she said, with a sob, “ I declare to ye I'm not fit to live. I'm not fit to live. To say such things to you—that are just as gentle and good and patient and unselfish as ever was seen—and not a word from ye back—and I was near turning ye out of the house. But they would not have let ye go—no, no ; the rest of the family have some sense, if there's an old woman among them that has no control of herself. But I'll make it up to ye, Ailie—I'll make it up to ye, Ailie, my love—— ”

Alison, having finished her task by this time, rose and put her arms round the old dame's neck and kissed her.

“Why, it’s nothing at all, Aunt Gilchrist,” said she lightly. “The best friends quarrel sometimes.”

“But I’ve something in my mind,” Aunt Gilchrist said, with a kind of doggedness. “I’ve something to see to. I’ll not let ye run any risk in the future, my lass ; there’ll be something come of this morning’s work ; I’ll not put ye at the mercy o’ burning nerves and ignorant doctors and idiots o’ shoemakers. I’ll take it out o’ my own power to do ye a harm—to do a harm to *you*, my lamb !” She was crying a little in a furtive kind of way. “Things have come to a pass when that was possible ! But something will come out o’ this morning’s work, I’m thinking. There, now,” she said, drying her eyes, “give me another kiss, Ailie, and go away and tell the lad John that I’ll have a letter ready for him in a few minutes, and he is to take it along immediately to Captain Macdonell.

Dear me!" she said, as she rose and took one or two preliminary cautious steps, "what a wonderful, wonderful nice thing it is to be able to walk!" She went more confidently, and with much obvious satisfaction, across the room to the small writing-table. "And if ye see Flora," she added, as Alison was going, "bid her come to me; for I've got to make her hold her tongue."

Thus it was that the long-talked-of visit to Oyre, that had been postponed and postponed, was all of a sudden resolved upon, as a first act of reparation to Alison for her aunt's evil treatment of her; and right glad was Captain Ludovick to be informed that the old lady and her valuable charges would start with him whenever he pleased. As usual, the Doctor pleaded professional cares; Mrs. Munro was an easy-going, placid, amiable creature, who liked nothing better than looking after her

household ; Hugh did not seem to see the fun of driving about the country with a parcel of women, and preferred remaining at home with his books ; so at last it was arranged that the four of them should form the party—that being a convenient number, besides, for the small waggonette.

On the appointed morning, as the two girls were getting ready, Flora said, laughingly, to her cousin—

“ I declare to you, Alison, I think Ludovick Macdonell is out of his mind.”

“ Why ? ”

“ Why ? Why, with anxiety about this wonderful visit. He is anxious that you should think a great deal of his father ; he is anxious that the old gentleman should be highly pleased with you ; he is anxious—about everything ! And I have got my instructions, I can tell you ; oh yes, he has a fine hectoring way with him when his mind is set on anything ; his lordship must

have everything done to suit. I've got my orders. I have to prepare you for a little disappointment with the modern look of the house ; I have to see that the old gentleman doesn't bore you with his tiger-shooting stories ; and I have to take great pains to let him understand that although you come from the south country you are not a low-minded, dangerous, water-drinking Radical. What else ? I don't know what else, I'm sure ! ”

“ It's all very well for you, Flora,” said Alison, though she was laughing too, “ to make a joke of it, but I'm getting thoroughly frightened. It is like going to see some fearful Bluebeard in a great castle. I would much rather you and Aunt Gilchrist would go and leave me at home.”

“ And what would his lordship the young laird say to me if I proposed that to him ? I should have my head in my hands, I

warrant you ! Oh, he is a terrible swash-buckler when his mind is set on anything."

"I don't see how it can be of any consequence whether I think well of his father, or his father think well of me," said Alison ; for she was really beginning to regard this visit with some apprehension.

"Neither do I," said Flora bluntly. "I don't see how you can be of any consequence to anybody. You shouldn't be, by rights. But it's just you prim ones, that are all so meek and quiet, that become of mighty consequence to everybody. There's Aunt Gilchrist now ; would she ever say she was sorry for scolding *me* ? Not a bit ; she would be more likely to give me another dose, and say it served me right. But she is all remorse when it is you she has scolded ; and last night she was worrying my father's life out to tell her what should be done about her money. Could it be settled by a deed of gift, with

her getting so much a year ; or was it to be handed over to trustees—and all the rest of it. I know what she was after. Why, you little cat, that money belongs to me !”

“Then you’re welcome to it, Flora,” said Alison cheerfully, “for anything I care.”

Captain Ludovick was favoured with a fine, bright, and breezy morning for this excursion on which he had so eagerly set his heart ; and during the long drive he did his best to keep his companions entertained. Aunt Gilchrist, indeed (perhaps because she was wearing cloth shoes), was particularly merry ; and Flora conducted herself with her usual happy and careless good-humour ; it was Alison alone who seemed to have something on her mind. And why, she might have asked herself, did she feel a sharp and sudden qualm when the carriage arrived at a great iron

gate that was slowly opened for them by the aged crone of a lodge-keeper? The grounds through which they now drove were exceedingly pretty; the sunlight shone on the sycamores and larches and firs, and put bars of gold across the winding road; there were gleams of blue between the stems, telling of the sea-loch that Oyre House overlooked.

“Miss Alison,” Captain Ludovick was saying, “do you see that crag there beyond the meadows? That’s where the old place used to be—there’s only a bit of a ruin there now; and when they came to build the present house I suppose they thought they would give us better shelter this time, for they’ve gone and jammed us down into a hollow, as you’ll see directly.”

Just as he spoke they came in sight of a large, plain, square building, whitewashed, but also weather-stained, with an abundance of small windows, each with its prim little

blind ; a moderate-sized lawn in front ; the house itself and its stables surrounded by a thicket of ash and sycamore and larch, through which one could catch a glimpse here and there of the sea. But in spite of the whitewash and the small, plain windows, there was an old-fashioned look about the place ; and of course to any one brought up in Kirk o' Shields this large weather-stained building, surrounded by its own meadows and woods, was quite an imposing structure. Perhaps, however, it was not so much of Oyre House as of the old laird himself that Alison was thinking.

Well, in a minute or two they had pulled up at the front door, which was open, and standing there Alison beheld a very striking figure—that of an old gentleman not over middle height, but of remarkably powerful build (like his son, indeed, in that respect), and with long white hair and long and

massive beard, also snow-white. From under his shaggy eyebrows there gleamed a pair of keen and scrutinizing gray eyes ; but the aspect of his face was entirely gentle—grave and gentle at the same time—as he came forward to receive them. He was dressed in the Highland costume, of a plain hunting tartan, and almost without ornament.

Flora he knew well enough, so that his greeting of her was of a familiar and friendly character ; but to the two strangers he was especially gracious, and Alison was convinced she had never seen any one with a manner so refined and distinguished and courteous. He spoke slowly, and with a marked Highland accent (no trace of which, by the way, was audible in Captain Ludovick's way of speaking), and his voice was persuasive and pleasant to hear. Of course his chief attention was devoted to the old lady ; but when they

had got into the drawing-room he turned to Alison.

“Indeed,” said he, in his slow and gently modulated fashion, “I am glad to hear that you hef been pleased with the Highlands, since it is your first feesit ; and I am glad there has been good weather, too.”

“I did not know there was any place half so beautiful,” said she simply.

“Do you say that now ?” he continued—but he was evidently much gratified. “Well, I hef been nearly all over the world ; but if there were places that might be considered more beautiful, I was always glad to come back to the Highlands. The Highlanders hef a great many faults ; but they are ferry fond of their own country, at any rate. And now that it is not likely I am going away any more, until I am called away altogether, I am well content to spend the last of my days where my

forefathers lived before me. It is a quiet place ; and when one grows old, one falls into quiet and settled ways ; and there are round you the people you hef known a great many years, so that you live among friends."

"And do you know, Miss Alison, how my father manages to live among friends ?" Captain Ludovick broke in. "Why, by ruining an ancient property, that he ought to be keeping together for his only son—that's me. It's very easy to live among friends if you give money right and left wherever it is wanted ; if you pension old servants ; and reduce and reduce rents if times are bad ; and pay premiums for getting boys into situations in Greenock and Glasgow ; and have every old woman in the neighbourhood looking to you for a subsistence. Oh yes, you may have plenty of friends that way ; and, besides that, you may have it become a byword in

the Highlands that the Macdonells of Oyre are as poor as a church-mouse."

"Well, now, that is a fine thing to say!" the old gentleman retorted (though he was clearly far from being displeased by his son's ingenuous flattery). "But what is one to do if you have for a son an idle, worthless lad, who is always going away, and not looking after his own people? Some one must look after them, surely?" He glanced towards the door. "Well, now, this is too much talking to serve for a Highland welcome, and after so long a journey, too. Ludovick, go and see if linch is not ready yet."

But before Captain Ludovick could cross the room, the booming of a gong in the hall told them that "linch" had already been served, whereupon the old laird, with much ceremony, escorted his principal guest to the dining-room, leaving his son to bring in the young ladies. It

was not, in truth, a sumptuous banqueting-hall in which the visitors now found themselves. There was a certain air of picturesqueness derived from the tigers' skins and stags' horns that were the chief ornament; but the furniture was of the clumsy old-fashioned mahogany and horse-hair sort that the modern upholsterer has happily abandoned. But the hospitality that prevailed was of an almost too pressing character; and if the old laird was grieved and disappointed that neither Flora nor Alison would take any of his claret (of which he gave them an ample history) he was delighted with the promptitude with which Aunt Gilchrist declared that, doctors or no doctors, she knew what was due to a Highland house, and would be proud to taste her host's whiskey.

"And I hef seen from my own obserfation," said he, in his slow, gentle fashion,

as he filled her glass from the decanter, "that it is the best drink for both the body and the mind. I neffer knew a man yet that was sound in the body and sound in the mind too—a respectable, religious, good-tempered man—that wass afrait of a little wheeskey. Oh, I know there are some who cry out against it; and who are they? Why, they are foolish, discontented people, whose body is altogether wrong, and their head too—ill-tempered people—that would hef no government—Radicals, and people of that kind. But I do not wish them any harm; for I take care that they do not come to Oyre; and the world is big enough to hold them and to hold me too."

After luncheon, they went into the hall; and the "last of the old Highland gentlemen," as Hugh Munro was rather fond of calling him, proceeded to descant on the spoils and trophies hanging there, as one

after another recalled the various adventures and expeditions of his earlier years. This was what young Macdonell had feared; but he was only successful in carrying off Flora and her aunt (coffee was awaiting them outside, at a little table round which chairs were placed); for Alison, to whom the old laird happened to be talking, made bold to remain with him, and was ready to listen as long as he pleased. For she was very grateful to him for all the kindness he had shown her, a mere stranger; and there was something peculiarly winning about his manner, and about the sound of his voice, too, which was so different from the raucous and guttural dissonance of Kirk o' Shields. As for him, he seemed to be greatly pleased to have for a companion this pretty, pale-faced, smiling young lady, whose questions showed what an intelligent interest she took in these records of foreign

travel and adventure. Nay, he would himself go and fetch for her inspection his famous tiger-slayer—an old-fashioned double-barrelled muzzle-loader of enormous weight; and he was immensely tickled when he found it was all she could do, with both hands, to raise this ponderous weapon from the ground. Moreover, when they all—all except Aunt Gilchrist, that is to say—set out to climb the bit of crag adjoining the house in order to visit the remaining vestiges of the ancient habitation of the Macdonells, Alison was still his companion, Captain Ludovick following with Flora. What Captain Ludovick thought of the arrangement can only be surmised; though there may have been some compensation in the assurance that these two had already become excellent friends.

And there were amends in store for the young laird of Oyre. When they returned

to the lawn, Mr. Macdonell would show them round the greenhouses and so forth ; and as this was more within the scope of Aunt Gilchrist's pedestrian powers, she set out with them on this leisurely perambulation. Somehow or other Alison got separated from the old gentleman, who was leading the way ; Aunt Gilchrist and Flora went on with him ; and "the bit lady" thus naturally fell under the charge of Captain Ludovick. But what was the meaning or need of all the apologies and excuses he now proceeded to make to her ? Did she not think it a desperately dull place ? What would she think of any one leaving the world and coming to live in such a solitude ? Alison looked up at him with a smile.

"I think," said she, "it would be no great hardship to leave the ordinary world and come and live in a far more beautiful world that is all your own. If I were you,

I don't think I should ever go as far as Fort William."

"Of course," said he hastily, "it isn't always as empty and forlorn as it looks at present. We have very often a few friends in the winter; for the winter shooting isn't at all bad. And I should think that even in the summer, if we had lady visitors staying with us, they might find amusement for themselves. Do you see that opening in the larches over there? That leads down to a small creek where there is a bathing-box; and the nymphs and naiads have the sandy little bay all to themselves. Then there's plenty of boating and sailing and sea-fishing; and there are decent-sized brown trout in the Tassley—the burn you crossed before coming to the gate——"

"And yet your father says you are hardly ever here," she interposed.

"Oh, well, one must see a bit of the

world, just as he did," the young laird answered. "It's hardly time for me to settle down—nor is there any inducement; though my father and I are the best of companions when I happen to be here. But this I know very well, that I shall never be like what he is, though I were to live to thrice his age. You would have to understand how poor we are before you could judge of the amount of good he does—for it's easy enough to be charitable when you've plenty of money; but I wish you could see the tact he shows in dealing with the people; they know perfectly well that what he does for them is not done out of a sentimentalism they can impose on; they know quite well, too, that if they don't do their best to help themselves, they needn't come to him. And what is the consequence? Instead of despising him, they respect him; they do more than respect him: I wish you could hear them

talk about him. And I wish you knew him well, Miss Alison ; I wish you knew him thoroughly : I think you would like him—or more than like him.”

“ Indeed, I am sure of that,” said Alison quite frankly and cheerfully ; for the old gentleman, instead of proving an ogre, had entirely charmed and captivated her by his old-world courtesy and pleasant voice.

“ I suppose it sounds absurd for me to talk of my own father in that way,” he continued, when he could make sure of not being overheard by those in front ; “ but the fact is, we have been chums since ever I can remember. He never tried to overawe me ; he has rather been a kind of brother and companion all the way through ; and I don’t know that he isn’t the younger man of the two—at least, I know that he has a lighter heart than I have at this moment.”

“ You ? ” said she, glancing up in sur-

prise ; it was a strange speech for a young man who had always seemed to her the very embodiment of high spirits and audacity and the delight of life.

“ His anxieties are all over, mine are only beginning,” he said briefly, and then he changed the subject. “ Of course you know, Miss Alison, that the heir to a property, however poor and insignificant it may be, is supposed to look with a jealous eye on every penny spent by the owner in possession, unless it's spent on the property itself. Well, not even on that point is there the least difference of opinion between my father and myself. What he is doing now I would do myself. If he were to die to-morrow—and there's not much chance of his dying to-morrow, thank God !—if he were to die to-morrow, and if I were to begin a new way of treating the place, I should deserve to be kicked out of it, neck and crop. And if

I were to marry, my wife would have to be of the same opinion too."

Perhaps he spoke inadvertently, in his eager desire that she should think well of his father ; but anyhow a sudden flash of pain shot through her heart. Yes, of course he would marry. He would no longer be the gay young bachelor-friend of the Munroes, and the possible sweetheart of Flora ; Captain Macdonell and his young wife would be living here at Oyre, or perhaps away travelling on the Continent ; and there would be some kind of barrier between him and his former acquaintances. Young Mrs. Macdonell would have her own companions and intimates when she came to Oyre—Alison could see her clearly, in that brief, sharp instant of forecast. Then quickly she asked him a perfectly irrelevant question about some pheasant-coops they were passing.

So the straggling little group made their idle and gossiping survey of the surroundings of this half-modern mansion and its "policies," though Alison, as her companion fancied, seemed a little absent-minded now. He asked her when she was going away to the south ; she said not the next day, but the day after had been fixed for her departure. He said he hoped she would remember the friends she had made in the Highlands ; she answered, with downcast eyes, that she was not likely to forget them. And when was she coming back ? Well, it would depend on Aunt Gilchrist if ever she came back. Aunt Gilchrist might be coming again in the following summer to see her relatives in Fort William ; perhaps she might be asked, too, for a little while, but she could not say. And he, also, grew somewhat silent as they were returning to the house.

As they drew near the lawn again—

they were all together now—they had to cross the end of a short avenue of sycamores leading down to the shore, and he said to her—

“If you will come here for a moment, I will show you the old garden; it is very pretty, I think—it won’t take you a second.”

She followed him, or went with him, rather; and presently he had opened a door in a stone wall all covered with ivy, and allowed her to pass in. It was a quaint, old-fashioned garden, formed on terraces overlooking the sea, and surrounded by this ivy-covered wall that rose, tier on tier, as the various heights demanded. But hardly was she within this enclosure than he put his hand lightly on her arm, and said—

“Alison, you are going away, and this is the only chance I may have of speaking to you. Can’t you imagine why I have

been so anxious you should come and see Oyre, and get to know my father? Do you think that at some future time—as far away in the future as you like—you could bring yourself to think of living at Oyre, dull as it is? Would it be too dull and poor and wretched? Would the old laird be too terrible a father-in-law to be faced? No,” he added, quickly, for she had stepped back a little, quite bewildered, and with her heart beating so wildly that it was impossible for her to speak, “I don’t want you to answer me now; you don’t know enough about us yet; but I know you; I have been watching all your goodness and gentleness and straightforwardness since ever you came among us; and in the end, if you say no, then there will never be a bride brought home to Oyre. Now, Alison! don’t be frightened into a refusal; wait until you know me better; I am content to wait until you say

yes ; only—only, well, I couldn't let you go away without telling you what I was looking forward to."

What was she to say ? Nay, what could she say ? In her first alarm and bewilderment she would have shrunk back with a trembling refusal ; but he had anticipated that ; he did not want her answer now ; it was only a vague dream of his—a wild and impossible dream, it seemed to her—that he had put before her. And then, ere she could speak or attempt to speak, there came a cry down the avenue—

"Alison, where are you ?"

Flora appeared at the gate.

"Come along, quick !—there's the most beautiful white peacock on the lawn—the most beautiful creature you ever saw——"

Flora stopped suddenly, and a rush of blood flew to her face ; some suspicion had crossed her mind ; but the next instant

Alison, though somewhat pale, had put her hand within her cousin's arm, and calmly said—

“Come, then.”

The two girls walked on together ; Ludovick Macdonell had to stay for a moment to shut the heavy door ; then he rejoined them, but without entering into any conversation. They went on towards the lawn, where the white peacock, resplendent of tail, was proudly stalking about ; and they found tea waiting for them there, for they were soon to start on their homeward drive.

It was now for the first time that the old laird learned that his son proposed to return to Fort William with these visitors ; and in the most gentle way he protested.

“Why, you are a ferry idle boy, Ludovick,” said he. “Here are the workmen coming to-morrow, and who should be looking after them but yourself ? They

will be building for you, and not for me."

Young Macdonell directed one swift glance towards Alison: would she understand that obedience to his father did not mean indifference to her?

"Very well, sir," said he; "if you think I should stay, I will. But I do not know that it is a Highland fashion to let your guests go home by themselves."

"Indeed, Captain Macdonell," said Aunt Gilchrist promptly, "if ye think we cannot look after ourselves on a bit drive back to Fort William, in the middle of the afternoon, what do ye take us for? And I'm thinking we're already responsible for having made ye waste far too much of your time of late."

"Poor Ludovick is always so extremely busy!" said Miss Flora, with much sympathy; and so that matter was settled; and Captain Ludovick attended them no

farther than the lodge-gate, where he stood waving a handkerchief so long as they were in sight.

Now this drive home, along the level shores of the sea-loch, was accompanied by a most remarkable phenomenon. The golden sunset light struck so fiercely on the glassy surface of the water that it was reflected upward, and threw a shadow of the carriage and horses quite distinct from that thrown by the direct rays of the sun ; and this ghostly equipage, according to the formation of the ground, would sometimes appear travelling along the lower slopes of the adjacent hill, sometimes along the knolls and crags nearer the road, and sometimes almost coinciding with the much darker natural shadow. This phantasmal, pale-gray *Doppelgänger*, now gliding along those distant golden banks, now coming startingly near, was altogether a singular and puzzling thing ; and it kept both Flora

and Aunt Gilchrist abundantly occupied. There were discussions as to the cause of it, and exclamations as it disappeared and reappeared at various distances—in the midst of all which Alison was allowed to sit quite silent and unnoticed. She was supposed to be watching too; in reality she was thinking of far other matters; her memory eagerly recalling every tone and gesture of his appeal to her in the old terraced garden; sometimes her imagination carrying her forward to all kinds of wistful possibilities, and suffusing her eyes with happy tears; and then again an indefinable presentiment convincing her that all this would prove to be a mirage, an idle dream. But this at least she knew well—that, whatever else might befall her after she had gone away from those friends who had made themselves so dear to her, and from those beautiful scenes in which she had sojourned for a while, whatever

else might happen in the harder and harsher world whither she was returning, this she knew, that she had left her heart behind her in Lochaber.

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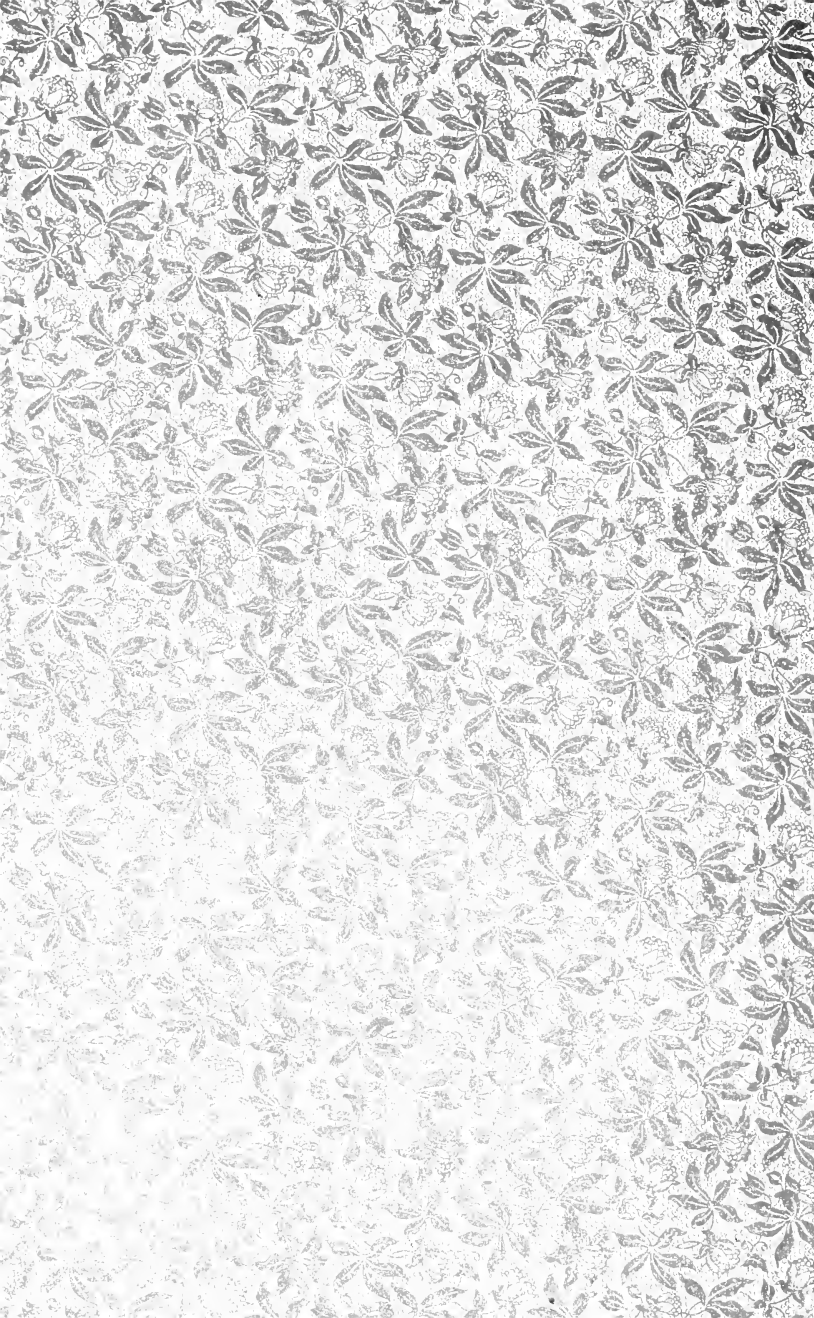
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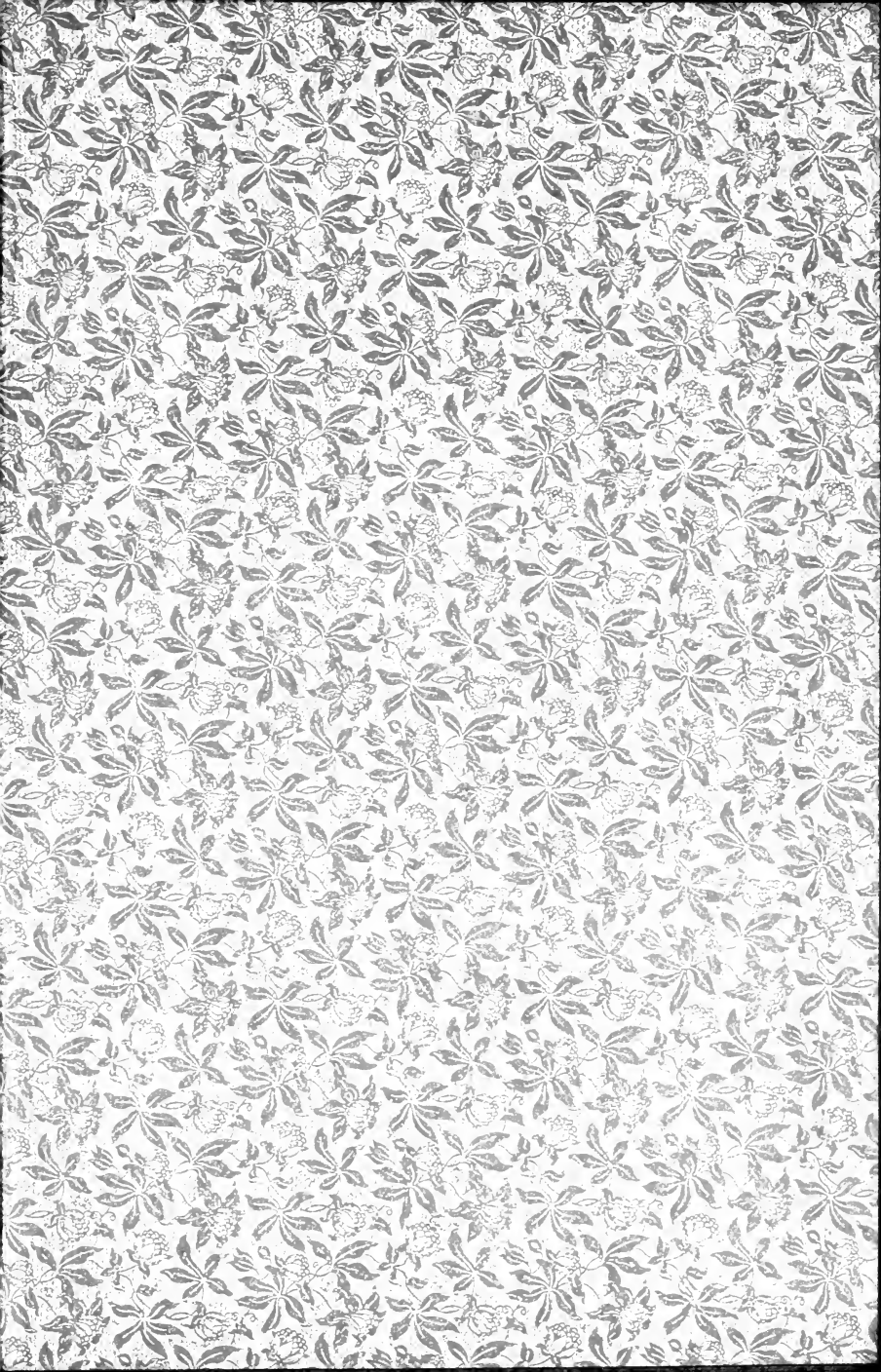
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